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OBSESSION

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HORROR

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MILK & SERIAL

ISSUE 230 MAY/JUNE 2026 US $14.95 CAN $15.95

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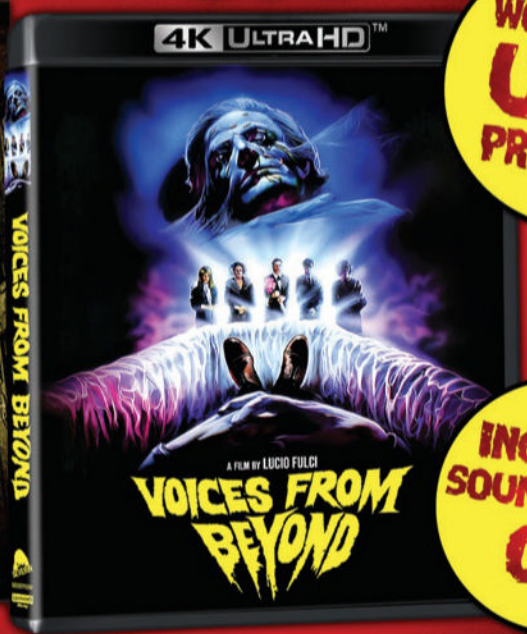

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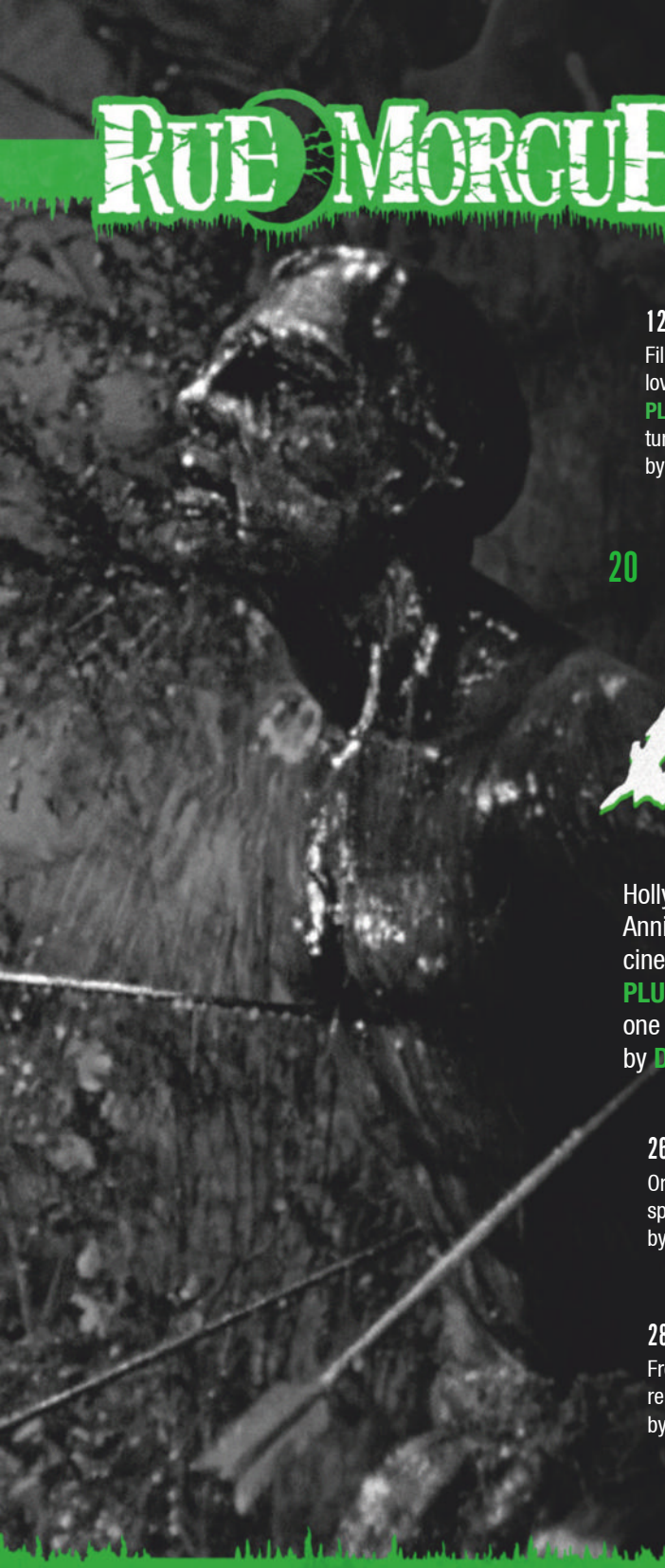
MAY/JUNE 2026 #230



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20 ORIGINS OF THE LIVING DEAD
Hollywood made it a monster. History tells a different story. Maya Annik Bedward's new documentary *Black Zombie* confronts a cinematic myth and restores the meaning buried beneath it.
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NOTE FROM UNDERGROUND

Love is a many splendored thing. Love lifts us up where we belong. All you need is love! Why, then, is the subject also such fertile ground for some truly nasty horror?

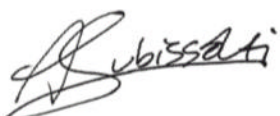
Full disclosure, Morguelings, your girl has been single for a couple of years now and if you've been out of the game for a while, lemme tell ya – it's a real horrorshow out there, and not the kind we like. At this point, I've developed a decent grasp of the latest dating nomenclature ("ghosting" has been replaced by the more insidious "orbiting," "benching," "pocketing," and "breadcrumbing,") to articulate the sort of unbecoming behaviour one might expect in an age where dating apps have essentially become a combination of human shopping networks and virtual slot machines.

Adding e-insult to injury, my social media algorithms have caught on to my single status, and have started feeding me endless ads to aid me in my presumed quest for True Love™: sex toys shaped like fruit, AI boyfriends, and reels of "dating coaches" advising me when to text, when *not* to text, when to fuck, when *not* to fuck, if/when to have the inevitable "what are we?" conversation, and where to bury the body when it all goes wrong. Does any of that sound remotely like the experience of running carefree along a beach, hand-in-hand, with your chlamydia-free lover who definitely isn't sexting four other girls while they have dinner with your parents?

All this to say, watching the movie *Obsession* – in which lovesick Bear attempts to bewitch his crush into loving him, with truly calamitous and blood-spattered results – hit me a little differently than it might have a few years ago. The old wish-granting monkey's paw isn't anything new to the genre, but its barbs do sink in deeper when they're aimed at the heart.

A lifetime ago, I wrote my Masters' thesis on how George A. Romero's zombies were a distinctly Americanized take on their Haitian foundation myths; Romero's ghouls brought chaos, consumption, and contagion (all things associated with anti-Black racism, interestingly), while in Haiti, citizens fear the threat of *becoming* a zombie and losing their free will. I'm delighted to see this topic explored more thoughtfully and completely in the documentary *Black Zombie*, with experts who articulate it better and with more nuance than I ever could. But it occurred to me that the horror of becoming a mindless automaton is also the terror at the root of *Obsession*, whose scariest scenes are the ones where Bear's object of affection hints at being an aware but helpless observer of her increasingly unhinged behaviour.

Love makes fools of us all, if not outright monsters, and we may as well embrace our embarrassing instances of irrational emotion… lest we become the soulless zombies of consumerism that will likely inherit the Earth. So come at me, breadcrumbers, love-bombers, and those with avoidant attachment styles! True Love™ is just a wish and a swipe away...



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RUE MORGUE #230 is dedicated to Reed Munro Nadon. Welcome to the weird world!

Cover: *Obsession*
Design by Shane Mills

We acknowledge the land that *Rue Morgue* is created upon is the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Wendat peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples.

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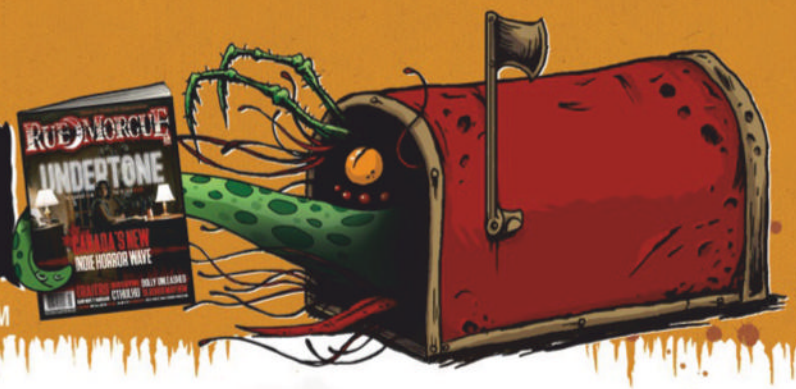
POST MORTEM

COMMENTS • QUESTIONS • CRITICISM



LOVED *UNDERTONE* AND the really interesting ways it used sound to get under your skin. I would not have known it was a Canadian film if it hadn't been for your issue [*RM#229*]. I now feel I need to track down every film from the Canadian filmmakers you featured in the issue and get myself a proper education on horror coming from up north. Thank you, *Rue Morgue*!

LARRY GAINES, VIA EMAIL

I WAS WONDERING if there was a plan to address the fact that Mia Ballard's *Shy Girl* was pulled from publication due to AI use? Of course, there was no way for you to know ahead of time, but since you featured it in the previous issue, and many readers such as myself use the magazine for reading recommendations, it might be worth mentioning.

ALEX FERLAND-DANIEL, VIA EMAIL

Yes absolutely, see Monica's Library of the Damned column on p.51. – Ed.

I AM WRITING IN REGARDS to the VS article in *RM#228*. While I do not particularly care about *A Serbian Film* one way or another, I was disturbed by Lena Reid's argument against it. She implied that horror movies and books could be saved from the censorship of "anti-horror pearl-clutchers" by the horror community censoring itself first. As someone living in the deeply conservative American South, I know this approach will never work. When I was growing up, I had friends whose parents viewed books even as innocuous as *Harry Potter* as being "of the devil" and forbidden. I can tell you that if we as horror fans took this self-censorship approach we'd be left with nothing long before the pearl-clutchers were satisfied. I think you can dislike *A Serbian Film*, and make arguments against it, without advocating for censorship.

EMILY GREGO, VIA EMAIL

HEY CREEPS, I HAD A SINKING FEELING when I sat down to watch *Return to Silent Hill* and fifteen minutes into it I knew why. I [still] think Christophe Gans is a very talented director and I can see why you were so eager to talk to him, but his return to theatres left something to be desired to put it mildly. On the other hand, I really liked your in-depth look at *A Serbian Film*, which is still the sickest film I have ever seen, hands down. The documentary sounds like it was made for me. Keep up the great work.

JASON LEWIS-HALL, VIA EMAIL

I JUST WANTED TO SEND a quick thank you for your Note from the March/April release of *Rue*. I am an American, queer, chronically ill blue dot in a red sea and getting the reminder that there's folks out there willing to engage with us even despite the */gestures/* horrors… it's a great thing to know. Blessed be the rebels, and I hope you and your life are wonderful.

R MITCHELL, VIA EMAIL

I ENJOYED *RM#228* even if I did not enjoy the latest *Silent Hill* movie. I just started playing *Deck of Haunts* – thanks for shouting it out; I love deck builder games and haunted houses. Do you like this postcard? I bought it as part of a set – tourist postcards featuring horror movie locales. I, however, bought them in Toronto. Some really good designs, you should check them out. Wishing you all the best from Halifax.

SHANNON FAY – ADDRESS WITHHELD

SINCE JOHN W. BOWEN RECENTLY wrote about Don Dohler's super-low-budget film *Fiend*, I wanted to pass along the information that John Kinhart (the filmmaker responsible for the *Blood, Boobs & Beast* documentary) recently released a short supplementary doc. It's available on YouTube and is about an investigation he did into the cemetery featured in *Fiend*, which focuses on something very interesting that one of the headstones in the film reveals. The short doc is called *Secret of the Fiend Graveyard*.

CARLIN COOK, VIA EMAIL

MY WIFE AND I ALWAYS GET A KICK out of your movie reviews and will often make choices based on your reviews – even the bad ones! Yes, we like bad horror movies; sometimes we like them more than the good ones. Will we ever see a cover story on a bad horror movie? :)

RON AND LIZ, VIA EMAIL

I HAVE BEEN READING *RUE MORGUE* for years and it is still one of the few magazines that really understands horror. That is why I am writing. I was not a fan of seeing *Frankenstein* as the cover story. I respect Guillermo del Toro, but this feels more like a mainstream production than true horror. What I have always liked about the magazine is that it shines a light on the strange and overlooked. Putting something this big on the cover feels like a step away from that. I am still a reader, and I still enjoy the magazine. This one just did not land for me. Hoping the next cover gets back to the darker stuff.

JOEUY, VIA EMAIL

RE: *LIFE AFTER CHUCKY:* *Christine Elise & Alex Vincent Talk Horror Legacy* on *Rue Morgue TV* – Most moved with what Christine said about the "Horror Family." That's *so beautiful* when you embrace you're one of the Creatures. Especially when you used to be an Angel.

@DOMENTORTHEONLYTRUE, VIA YOUTUBE

RE: *LIFE AFTER CHUCKY:* *Christine Elise & Alex Vincent Talk Horror Legacy* on *Rue Morgue TV* – – I love this channel and learning so much more about horror.

@TYRELLZEBRA3000, VIA YOUTUBE

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CORONER'S REPORT

WEIRD STATS & MORBID FACTS

ISSUE # 230

In a practice later called "mummy mania," some Europeans from the early modern period into the 19th century ingested powdered Egyptian mummies as medicine.

In Julia Ducournau's *Raw* (2016), the notorious raw-chicken scene was filmed using sugar. Actress Garance Marillier later noted that the experience didn't put her off meat – only candy.

In 2020, a nurse working at a Yale clinic stole at least 175 vials of fentanyl, replacing them with saline, leaving dozens of women to endure painful procedures without proper medication.

Cherophobia refers to a fear of happiness, rooted in the belief that feeling too joyful may lead to negative consequences.

Most of Robert Wise's *The Haunting* (1963) was shot through lenses that added a curvature to the walls, making the house seem even more strange.

Attila the Hun choked to death on his own blood after falling asleep with a bad nosebleed.

The producers of *Squirm* (1976) reportedly lost track of how many worms were used during filming, ordering shipments of up to 250,000 at a time, a demand so high it strained the region's fishing-bait supply that year.

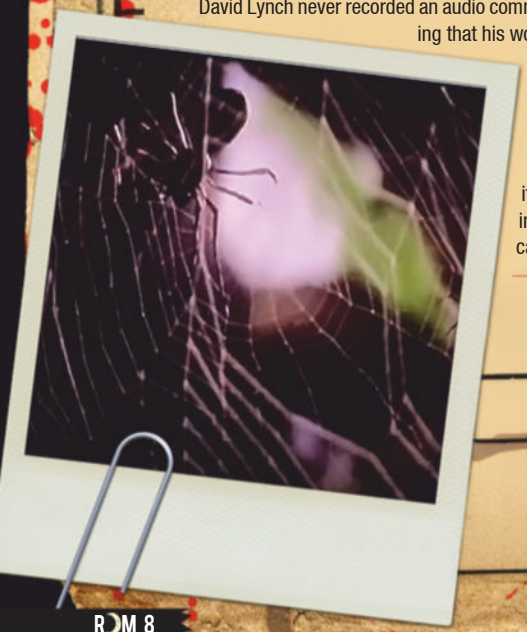
A rare Hawaiian caterpillar nicknamed the "Bone Collector" earns its name from an unusual survival tactic: it scavenges insect remains from old spiderwebs and attaches the debris to its body as camouflage.

Mario Bava's 1966 film *Kill, Baby… Kill!* came about after American distributors wagered that he couldn't complete a feature in twelve days, a challenge he met.

The last guillotine execution occurred in France on September 10, 1977, when murderer Hamida Djandoubi was put to death in Marseille.

The anticoagulant protein in vampire bat saliva, which prevents blood from clotting while they feed, is known as "Draculin."

David Lynch never recorded an audio commentary for any of his films, maintaining that his work speaks for itself.



A shot of a spiderweb inside a cave in Sam Raimi's *Send Help* was widely interpreted as a nod to *Spider-Man*, but Raimi reportedly added it after early test audiences kept asking, "Why don't they just live in the cave?"

COMPILED BY JAY CLARKE
GOT A WEIRD STAT OR MORBID FACT?
SEND IT TO: INFO@RUE-MORGUE.COM

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EXPIRING MINDS...

ON RUE MORGUE'S SOCIAL MEDIA

What musician would make a great rock star vampire Lestat?

A combination of '80s Robert Smith and Adam Ant for the paleness, red lips, and eyeliner alone.
@BLLYDDPAETWR, VIA INSTAGRAM

1989 to early '90s Axl. If you could handle his ego.
MARK FLUTER, VIA FACEBOOK

Peter Murphy of Bauhaus for obvious reasons.
KATHRYN OWEN, VIA FACEBOOK

Taylor Swift (and if that seems controversial, remember Cher was considered for Louis in the '90s).
RYAN MCFARLANE, VIA FACEBOOK

Rick Springfield would have killed it well into his forties.
AARON JOHNSTON, VIA FACEBOOK

FINAL WORDS
AS CAPTIONED BY YOU ON OUR SOCIAL MEDIA

"WELL DANG, JIMMY, YOU WAS RIGHT. SHE AIN'T CAKE!"

THIS MONTH'S CAPTION CONTEST WINNER IS
KIT PASOLD, VIA FACEBOOK
Follow us on Facebook, Bluesky, and Instagram for a chance to have your Final Words!

THE MOTHMAN COMETH

Mark Pellington's 2002 supernatural horror film *The Mothman Prophecies* presents us with a classic cryptid steeped in a hearty dose of bad omens. Richard Gere plays John Klein, a reporter and widower following the trail of a mysterious moth-like creature in Point Pleasant, West Virginia, which not only resembles a creature his late wife drew while hospitalized with a brain tumour, but also brings with it disruptions in space-time, portents of doom, and an overall sense of melancholy. But while this cinematic creature carried an air of clairvoyant mystery, its real-life counterpart is far less whimsical.

As legendary beings go, the Mothman is a relatively new member, as it was first documented in West Virginia's *Point Pleasant Registry* on November 16, 1966. A group of friends driving along State Route 62 reported seeing a large figure, close to seven feet tall, with wings and glowing red eyes near the site of an old munitions plant. It appeared to take flight and was able to keep up with them driving at top speed. The group arrived at their destination uninjured but terrified, and the *Registry* reported on the phenomenon with the bewildered headline "Couples See Man-Sized Bird… Creature… Something."

As is usually the case, townspeople reacted to the unknown by taking up arms and trying to hunt the creature with rifles. While the mob didn't find anything, the Mothman continued to make appearances in the area, slinking in the shadows, chasing people in their cars, and snatching dogs. Perhaps the most significant incident wasn't even a direct sighting, but rather a suspicion that the Mothman was the harbinger of the Silver Bridge collapse in 1967 that killed 46 people. Author John Keel's *The Mothman Prophecies* perpetuated this belief by positing that the cryptid was some kind of psychic vision manifested by alien lifeforms.

Now, we could point out that Keel's book contradicted many of his notes from the official investigation, or that biologists assert the initial sightings likely described a sandhill crane that had deviated from its normal migration route, but Point Pleasant remains committed to letting its collective imagination run, hosting an annual festival dedicated to the winged fella since 2002 that draws thousands of tourists each year.

Aside from Pellington's film, Mothman has appeared in myriad other movies and documentaries, countless books, and even popped into a Halloween *Fortnite* event. But for my money, the best use of Mothman in popular culture is in smut. You really haven't lived until you've read a sex scene where a participant's penis has antennae coming out of it.

BRYAN CHRISTOPHER

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO...

Robert Strange, "Female Werewolf / Hunchback" from *Howl* (2015)

Though Robert Strange started down the track of creature creative a whole five years earlier – when his debut screen role as "The Master Vampire" in *Penny Dreadful* unexpectedly served as an introduction to monster prosthetics – he built up a real head of steam following 2015's *Howl*. Since that train-bound horror, he has been rendered wholly unrecognizable in multiple *Star Wars* productions, given form to the nightmare antagonists of *Marrowbone* (2017), *The Jack in the Box* (2019) and *Boys from County Hell* (2020), as well as returning to the small screen to portray a cast of fantastical characters for *Doctor Who* and *TLOTR: The Rings of Power*. While Mr. Strange does sometimes get to play human individuals, popping up fleetingly in *The Crown*, for example, such occasions are comparatively rare. Earlier this year, he donned the iconic (if impractical) helm of Pyramid Head in *Return to Silent Hill*.

LOUIS FLETCHER

NEEDFUL THINGS

1 ELVIRA, MISTRESS OF THE DARK AUTUMNAL GIN

$43.99 USD

Having licensed everything from cosmetics to apparel to big-titty mousepads, it's perhaps only appropriate that the Mistress of the Dark has entered an unholy collab with the spooky distillers at As Above So Below for a line of spirits! Try the Elvira brand autumnal gin blend for a ghoulish gimlet, or her 80-proof vodka for a creepy cosmopolitan.

Aasbdistillery.com

2 UNIVERSAL MONSTERS HEADCOVERS

$60 USD

We're not really the golfing sort, but these officially licensed Famous Monsters club covers sure make it tempting to start! Choose from The Black Lagoon's Gill-Man, Frankenstein's Monster, and the Wolf Man, and add some boo to your birdie!

Rsvlts.com

3 *JAWS* SUMMER PARTY SET

$42 USD

You're gonna need a bigger backyard once the neighbourhood learns that the guest list to your summer BBQ includes ol' Bruce. This summer party set by Silver Buffalo includes paper plates, cups, and napkins – everything you need to turn your backyard gathering into a blockbuster bloodbath.

Nightmaretoys.com

4 *TOXIC AVENGER* BRICK BUST

$69 USD

LEGO hasn't been for kids in a long time, with buildable sets for such popular franchises as *Dune* and *Lord of the Rings*. Introducing Horror Bricks, here to offer crafty cryptids the chance to put together unique collectibles from our favourite genre franchises! This officially licensed Toxie bust is made up of 722 pieces and is a limited run – join the Kickstarter to take advantage of early bird pricing, and Melvin will arrive to toxify your mantle later this spring!

Horrorbricks.com

5 P IS FOR POE TODDLER TEE

$30 USD

Silly parents, Blackcraft is for kids! Teach your baby bat the alphabet and some essential horror history at the same time with this classic fit, short sleeve toddler tee that all but guarantees total style domination of the playground.

Blackcraftcult.com

CABINET OF CURIOSITIES

WHITING SHRUNKEN HEAD APPLE SCULPTURE KIT (1975)

There are all kinds of reasons to collect vintage trinkets. Some people love the thrill of hunting through comic-cons and thrift stores, and some people love possessing rare artifacts, only a handful of which exist in the world. But me? I love products for which there is no modern equivalent. Those little pieces of our past that reflect the weirder side of fan culture – stuff that makes you wonder if people really paid money for *that*!

So, allow me to kick off this new column with a favourite oddity of mine: the Shrunken Head Apple Sculpture kit by Whiting, a Milton Bradley company, from 1975. Right there on the front is our old buddy Vincent Price, in the kind of celebrity endorsement that could never exist outside of the '70s, proudly declaring that this kit will allow you to create your own collection of "delightful" shrunken heads.

Within the kit, Whiting provides you with everything you need for the craft, except the apples. You're instructed to carve the fruit into the shape of a face with the plastic tool provided (one can only imagine that it's similarly useless to those dollar store pumpkin-carving implements), soak it in a salt brine, and suspend it from a hook inside the "Shrinker" device, which is a mini dehydrator you attach to any simple house lamp. Decorate the withered result with beads for teeth and tufts of fake hair, and before you know it, you'll have shrunken heads hanging from your belt. Or your neck! Something the whole family can enjoy.

As the ad plainly states, "Vincent Price's pretty face on the cover" is the real reason to add this piece to your cabinet of curiosities. As strange as the idea of having family fun making shrunken heads may be, Price is a natural fit for this kind of quasi-Halloween activity set; not only because of his horror status, but his love of cooking as well. There aren't many horror icons like Price, as comfortable in the dungeon as they are in the kitchen, so the idea of a genre celebrity in 2026 shilling a ridiculous craft kit that's little more than Mr. Potato Head by way of an Easy-Bake Oven is pretty out there! But I say we bring this kind of thing back. Guillermo, if you're reading this, I'd like to pitch you on Guillermo del Toro's Potato Homunculus Kit. Think about it…

In the meantime, get your very own Shrunken Head Apple Sculpture kit for between $100 CAD (for an opened box) and $900 CAD (for a sealed box in mint condition) on eBay.

MAGILL FOOTE

A CRAFT FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY
"Create your own collection of delightful Shrunken Heads."
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crafts by whiting
AGES 12 to ADULT
Shrunken Head
APPLE SCULPTURE

CARDBOARD CRYPT

TOPPS CREATURE FEATURE "YOU'LL DIE LAUGHING" TRADING CARDS (1973)

For as long as there have been horror movies, there have been people shouting jokes at them. But before *Mystery Science Theater 3000* and *Rue Morgue*'s Final Words section, fans had to get their B-movie yucks from other sources, such as Topps' Creature Feature "You'll Die Laughing" trading cards. Topps released three different runs of the cards, which pair a black-and-white still from a classic horror film with a dad-worthy one-liner sure to make you roll your eyes. And if that wasn't enough, there's another groaner joke on the back!

The first set, printed in 1959, was released under Topps' "Bubbles, Inc." label, reserved for products they weren't confident about, but once the cards proved a hit, Topps embraced the series for their 1973 and 1980 runs. Unfortunately, the company didn't embrace high-quality materials and thus, these cards are prone to wear and tear due to their rather flimsy stock.

The good news is that they're easy to find, and if you don't mind a less-than-mint pre-owned set, the '73 series of 128 cards can be yours for around $100 CAD. That's less than a buck a card for gags like this one featuring Vincent Price (him again!) in *The Abominable Dr. Phibes*! Worth every penny, if you ask me.

MAGILL FOOTE

FILMMAKER CURRY BARKER TRANSFORMS A SIMPLE WISH INTO A SPIRALLING NIGHTMARE OF LOVE, POSSESSION, AND BLOODSHED IN HIS BREAKOUT FEATURE *OBSESSION*

Killer CRUSH

BY Sean Plummer

HOLLYWOOD HAS LONG REWARDED PRECOCIOUS TALENT. REMEMBER ORSON WELLES, WHO PARLAYED THE THEATRICAL and radio success of his Mercury Theatre repertory company into a movie career that saw him co-write, direct, star in, and produce *Citizen Kane* at the tender age of 25. No one is calling Curry Barker the Orson Welles of horror (at least, not yet), but the 25-year-old from Mobile, Alabama, did similarly leverage the success of his self-made YouTube sketch channel with collaborator Cooper Tomlinson into writing and directing his critically acclaimed feature film *Obsession*, which sees wide release May 15 through Focus Features (Elevation in Canada).

Obsession stars Michael Johnston (TV's *Teen Wolf*) as Bear, an insecure young man with a huge crush on his co-worker Nikki (Inde Navarrette) but without the guts to tell her how he feels. So, when he discovers an item called the One Wish Willow in a witchy gift shop promising to grant its user a single wish, he gives it a shot. Alas for Bear, his wish is granted and Nikki is suddenly, against all prior signs, completely besotted with him… so much so, that she isn't quite herself anymore. But this ain't no young adult rom-com, and when things go from cringey to downright bloody, Barker and company really paint the walls with it.

"AS A TRUE HORROR FAN, I GET VERY FLUSTERED WHEN HORROR MOVIES PULL THEIR PUNCHES, AND I THINK IT'S SOMETHING WE SEE ALL THE TIME."

– WRITER/DIRECTOR CURRY BARKER

Devoured By Desire: *After using a "One Wish Willow" trinket to make his co-worker Nikki (Inde Navarrette) fall in love with him, Bear (Michael Johnston) realizes he's made a terrible mistake.*

It's a classic be-careful-what-you-wish-for parable, but the supernatural aspects of the wish-granting willow branch are couched in a grounded setting, with characters reacting to the bonkers happenings in refreshingly credulous ways. Rounding out the cast are Bear's longtime friend Sarah (Megan Lawless), who may be harbouring some unrequited love of her own, and his blowhard buddy Ian (Cooper Tomlinson), who's convinced something strange is afoot. As Nikki spirals from lovesick girlfriend to self-destructive disaster, Bear and all his friends are at risk of her newfound mania. But the real horror of *Obsession* is the sadness and terror that leaks out of Nikki, even in her near-possessed state, suggesting she is aware of her sudden madness and is unable to stop it.

It's dark stuff, but that's not to say *Obsession* is devoid of occasional moments of levity and laughter, particularly a memorable scene where Bear calls the customer service line on the One Wish Willow packaging to lodge a formal complaint amid the wreckage of his life. It's hardly surprising, given that much of the material on Barker's That's a Bad Idea YouTube channel is sketch comedy, and those instincts are on full display.

The wide release of *Obsession* places Barker among genre filmmakers such as Dan Trachtenberg (*10 Cloverfield Lane*) and David F. Sandberg (*Lights Out*), who parlayed success on YouTube into major studio releases – trading traditional distribution for likes and subscriptions while building audiences through word of mouth. That deafening buzz brought Barker to Blumhouse, then to a prestigious premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival, and now to the cover of *Rue Morgue*.

We caught up with Barker to discuss all things *Obsession* from Vancouver where he is working on his follow-up, the Blumhouse-backed horror-comedy *Anything But Ghosts*.

What are the origins of* Obsession*?

I've always just been intrigued by the idea of a movie about two people that are obsessed with each other and how crazy that can go. I think the wish element was something I kind of discovered later on. Once I was able to find a storytelling device, that kind of got me to where I wanted the movie to go. It really started to become clear in my mind that there's a guy who really loves a girl, and then there's a girl who really loves a guy – and then that becomes more than he bargained for. That idea just was so intriguing to me, there's so much to explore.

The conversation that Nikki and Bear have early on about the difference between romance and love seems important within the context of what Bear unknowingly does to Nikki – someone he claims to love.

Interestingly enough, that scene got cut quite a bit. In the original script, she goes on a long monologue where she talks about how she doesn't believe that romance is real. She thinks love is real, but romance is just in the movies. She basically talks about how romance is this glorified thing that doesn't last very long, and love is the real deal where you love someone and, you know, it transcends romance. It's more about what you would do for someone. It's actually something I was really excited about, that monologue, and maybe one day we'll see it in an extended cut.

How did you approach writing Nikki's situation in terms of her being taken over by this supernatural force against her will?

I kind of clung to what I thought was creepy. When she does these things, where she snaps back into her body for a second and she's conscious and it's the real Nikki – what would that feel like, to be teleported into a random spot and not really know where you are or what's happening? That was just something that was really intriguing to me, so I tried to explore it.

The One Wish Willow is a great device that sets the plot in motion. How did you develop its look and design?

I was thinking about a monkey's paw first, and then I didn't want to do that because I felt like it had been done before. I did so much research about different devices that could make wishes; there's the wishbone, there's the wishing well, there's a shooting star. None of them felt really right. So, I decided – you know what? – screw this. I'm just gonna make something up. And so, I just started coming up with names, and I just kind of came up with One Wish Willow because it kind of had a ring to it. Here's another thing I didn't want: I didn't want this to be something that just showed up on the doorstep and was this mysterious "Uh, where did it come from?" [item] and you'll never know where it came from. I wanted it to be [a situation where] if you want to, you can go into the store and you could buy this thing, and somehow it just works, you know? That was something that we really haven't seen much of. So that was exciting to me, making a product that you can buy. Once I did that, I went to my mom and I was like, "I want the box to look whimsical, and I want it to be unassuming and kind of innocent."

"WORD OF MOUTH IS SO POWERFUL NOWADAYS. I OWE IT EVERYTHING. IT'S THE REASON THAT I'M WHERE I'M AT."

– WRITER/DIRECTOR CURRY BARKER

Why did you turn to your mom for that?

She's a graphic art designer. We worked really closely together. I had lots of notes. I think she was very annoyed with me towards the end of the process, but it was really lovely working with her on it, and now the design is going to be everywhere. So, she is just amazed. She didn't expect her design to be everywhere!

Hexed: *What starts as a storybook romance quickly dissolves into terror that both Bear and Nikki are helpless to contain.*

Obsession ***is not quite a horror-comedy but it has its lighter moments. How did you approach balancing comedy and horror in the film?***

It's interesting, because I approach certain scripts differently. I know that there's a certain tone [I'm going for]. It's more about how grounded you want it versus how ungrounded you want it. That's kind of like my base point for where I go with it. A comedy that's just full comedy might have things happen in the world that are so wacky and unpredictable that it almost feels like the consequences for those things aren't real, and so the stakes kind of take a loss because of it. It's more about balancing the groundedness and making sure that the stakes always feel real. If you do that, you can make the comedy as awesome or as funny as you want. But, you know, I often find myself getting laughs in places that I didn't expect. Even in [my 2023 short film] *The Chair* – I remember watching that in the theatre when I was doing the festivals and people were laughing at parts that I didn't expect a laugh. Same thing for *Obsession*.

Do you think your background in comedy gave you an advantage making **Obsession**, ***or horror movies in general?***

Absolutely. Because I think comedy teaches you to find relatable situations, and I'm constantly thinking about the real human condition. I'm constantly thinking about human behaviour, and comedy kind of forces you to think about human behaviour and think about the way that we talk to each other, the way that we treat each other, why we treat each other a certain way. All of that is studied for humour and all of that is studied for horror. So, I think when you put so much focus on that type of stuff, it really does lend a hand for horror for sure.

Would you ever consider making a straight-up horror comedy like **Return of the Living Dead***?*

I think I'll always have an element of comedy in

Cont'd on p.18

BEFORE *OBSESSION*, CURRY BARKER'S FOUND-FOOTAGE SHOCKER *MILK & SERIAL* TURNED A MICRO-BUDGET EXPERIMENT INTO A VIRAL HORROR BREAKOUT

CURRY BARKER HAS A LOT OF CULTURAL HEAT ON HIM RIGHT NOW THANKS TO HIS UPCOMING SUPERNATURAL HORROR FILM *Obsession*, but that film's triumphant premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival last summer was not the Mobile, Alabama–raised filmmaker's first brush with fame. He and his creative partner Cooper Tomlinson had steadily built up a loyal following (over 1.2 million subscribers) on their YouTube channel That's a Bad Idea, as well as its TikTok counterpart (1.3 million followers). It was through these channels that Barker became a household name in August 2024 – at least among Reddit's r/horror community, always eager for new content from up-and-coming talent. Clocking in at just over an hour, the pair's twisty found-footage horror film *Milk & Serial* stars Barker and Tomlinson as Milk and Seven, respectively – a pair of L.A. YouTubers who built their online success on the sometimes-cruel pranks they play on one another. But the stakes within their professional/personal relationship become that much higher when their hijinks escalate to include murder. In addition to performing, Barker wrote, produced, edited, and directed *Milk & Serial*, while also serving as co-cinematographer and composer while Tomlinson produced and partially shot the film.

"We just got along very quickly because we met in school and wanted to *do* something," says Barker of the origin of his partnership with Tomlinson, whom he met in 2018. "I moved out to Los Angeles when I was eighteen – so did he – and we met there in Los Angeles. And you can kind of pick out the crowd who wants to actually [make films] and who wants to just kind of have fun and get through classes. On the weekends, we would make films together right away, and it was like, 'Oh, we could do this and we could do that.' And so, we kind of clung to each other in that way."

Milk & Serial evolved from Barker coming up with a variety of scenes for his acting reel; as he worked on writing a serial killer scene, it dawned on him that he could turn it into a tasty little found-footage film. So, he and Tomlinson started plotting out *Milk & Serial* as their next production. Shooting took place with a group of friends over the course of four months, mostly on weekends.

Milk & Serial was quickly embraced upon its release by the online horror community, including well-regarded YouTube film reviewers such as Chris Stuckmann. Their enthusiastic critical embrace has pushed the film's YouTube viewership past 2.2 million as of this writing and propelled Barker and Tomlinson's brand of cinematic insanity into the cultural mainstream – an evolution that should be further amplified by the theatrical release of *Obsession*. While YouTube was not their first venue of choice for *Milk & Serial*, in retrospect, Barker admits it was the right one.

"I think theatrical would have been amazing," he allows. "It's funny because I remember being on set and telling everyone involved, 'Don't worry, this movie's gonna be on Netflix,' or 'This movie's gonna be on Hulu,' or whatever… really kind of promising people that this movie was go-

ing to be something, that we were going to make sure of that. But we had no idea. We were just hoping, dreaming that it could be something. The plan was to shoot for the stars."

Attracting a distributor proved more difficult than Barker and his team anticipated, however. They did find one but were put off by the distributor's plan to place the film behind a paywall, leading Barker to upload it to his YouTube channel after spending more than a year pursuing the usual channels.

"WHEN *VARIETY* SAID IT WAS THE SEVENTH BEST HORROR MOVIE OF THE YEAR, I COULDN'T BELIEVE IT – ESPECIALLY BECAUSE IT WAS A YOUTUBE MOVIE."

– CURRY BARKER

"I think after a year of that, we kind of were just like, 'You know what? This movie has a YouTube feel to it. It's got YouTube in it. Let's just release it on YouTube.' And we did not expect that it would get the response that it did."

Barker and Tomlinson's particular blend of no-budget YouTube filmmaking, where imagination and innovation trump expensive special effects or glamorous locations, provided many lessons that they would take with them into filming *Obsession*, whose budget was a comparatively generous $1 million USD." That included plotting the entire film digitally with director of photography Taylor Clemons before arriving on set, allowing them to avoid going over budget or shooting longer than they had planned.

"You learn to do things scrappy [for YouTube content]," says Barker. "What's funny is that I still take that with me. I'm doing this movie in Vancouver right now, [the Blumhouse horror comedy *Anything but Ghosts*], and we're doing these budgeting meetings, and I'm like, 'I'm a director, I'm not really supposed to know about the money and all that, you know?' But when they're telling me I have to cut pages or something and I don't want to do that, I start to come up with creative ideas to do it cheaper, and that's because that's my background. I'm always thinking of ways to do it for cheaper or figure out ways to fix or finesse the situation; that's what we come from."

In addition to *Milk & Serial*'s acclaim among genre fans, the online horror community buzz soon attracted attention from more established media outlets such as *Variety*, who astonished Barker with some very high praise.

"When *Variety* ran a piece saying it was the seventh [best] horror movie of the year, I couldn't believe it, especially because it was a YouTube movie," he says. "I didn't even think it would qualify for that list. You know, I was in the company of *The Substance* and movies that I looked up to that year, and so I just couldn't believe I was on a list like that, for a YouTube movie."

At 62 minutes, *Milk & Serial* is a lean and mean horror film without an ounce of fat on it, and a critical stepping stone in what promises to be strong careers for all involved. But when asked if he would ever consider remaking it into a longer, more "proper" full-length release, Barker demurs.

"It's funny because I always considered it a feature film," he says. "I never thought we were making a short. There is an hour-and-twenty-minute cut of the movie; that was the cut of the movie for quite a while, and no one forced my hand. I think Cooper and I, when we decided to put it on YouTube, we were like, 'Let's cut twenty minutes off this thing and just make it the most powerful piece of material.'"

my horror. I even think my movie that I'm working on right now, *Anything But Ghosts*, leans more into comedy than *Obsession* did. So, I think you'll see a true horror comedy in my next project. But I think the difference between my stuff and [*Return of the Living Dead*] is that that's a 100% horror comedy. I feel like the difference between me [and full-on horror comedy] is that I'll always hold onto the stakes. I'll always hold onto the dread and making sure that the scary parts are still scary and that the horror still lands. That might be why you would never consider it a true horror comedy, but it's always going to be funny.

When the violence in* Obsession *hits, it hits really hard. How important was it for the violence to have that emotional impact?

I think it's everything. The reason is because I can only make a movie that I would want to see. As a true horror fan, I get very flustered when horror movies pull their punches, and I think it's something we see all the time. You know, I go to the theatre to get a good scare, and I go to the theatre to *feel* something. And when you're watching something and you can lean over to your friend and say, "Watch this, they're not gonna let the little kid die. The kid's gonna be saved." And five minutes later, the kid's saved! And it's just like, come on, right? So, I love to use that type of stuff to my advantage. I love the fact that you can lean over to your girlfriend and say, "Hey, watch this, they're gonna be saved," but in *my* movie, they're *not* gonna be saved. I almost want you to think that I'm gonna pull my punch – until I don't.

Stylistically, were you inspired by any particular horror films in making* Obsession*?

There are definitely filmmakers that I look up to. Ari Aster is a huge inspiration of mine, and I've been watching a lot of older films. I've been studying blocking. There's a certain shooting style that I really gravitate towards, and I've tried my best to stick to certain rules that we put together for the film, that kind of create a visual language. We're always trying to push ourselves to not cut – we don't want to be too cutty. We want to try to maximize the storytelling within the frame.

What were the challenges of directing a feature meant to play in theatres versus your previous work on YouTube?

I like to tell a story wide; I don't like to get too close. I like to earn the close-up. Every single thing that you can do with a camera, whether you're shooting it on 50 or 35[mm lenses], whether you're shooting wide open or you're closing the aperture, all of these things are storytelling devices. Even earning a close-up becomes a storytelling device. When you're shooting for your phone or shooting for TikTok or whatever, you do kind of get a little closer because the screen is so small. What I've learned is that when you're working on such a big screen, you can actually get even wider, and you can trust that you can see someone's facial expressions in a wide shot. The filmmakers that I look up to, they stay pretty wide, but it's hard to do that when you're on set because you're looking at the small little monitor. You have to fight that instinct or urge to punch in because you have to think about it on a really big screen.

You've built up quite a following through your YouTube channel and there have been a bunch of other YouTube creators starting film careers recently, such as RackaRacka, Kane Pixels, and Markiplier. How important do you think those social media platforms like YouTube and Reddit are going to be for developing and exposing new horror talent in the coming years?

I think [social media is] the most important thing for getting yourself out there; it's the most important tool for new filmmakers. You know, you could go to a film festival and get – if you're lucky – 250 people to watch your movie on the big screen. You could also post it on YouTube and get at least 2000 to 3000 views after a few months. I mean, that's quadruple the number of eyes on your project! I think it's about getting eyes on your project, and if people like it, people will speak up. There are entire YouTube channels that are dedicated to reviewing horror, short films, and hyping up short films. If you can get your project on one of those videos, it helps. Word of mouth is so powerful nowadays. I owe it everything. It's the reason that I'm where I'm at.

What does that mean to you, going from posting* Milk & Serial *on YouTube to having* Obsession *screen in movie theatres?

From the standpoint of my childhood and from the standpoint of my dreams as a ten-, eleven-, twelve-year-old that wanted to do this so bad, it's everything. I've been making YouTube videos since I was twelve, and so this just feels like a completely different thing. Whether you want to call [a theatrical release] "prestige" or not, people treat it differently. I get texts and DMs [saying] "Oh, my gosh, Curry, I was at the theatre, and I saw your name in the trailer for *Obsession*!" And I'm just like, "Yeah, I don't know, it's crazy!" People treat it different, and so it feels different. But to your point – and I think what you're getting at – you can get the same amount of love and views from a platform like YouTube nowadays. That's just the world that we live in. It's more about the way that people choose to treat it, and I think over time people will treat it differently. But right now, it's a huge thing.

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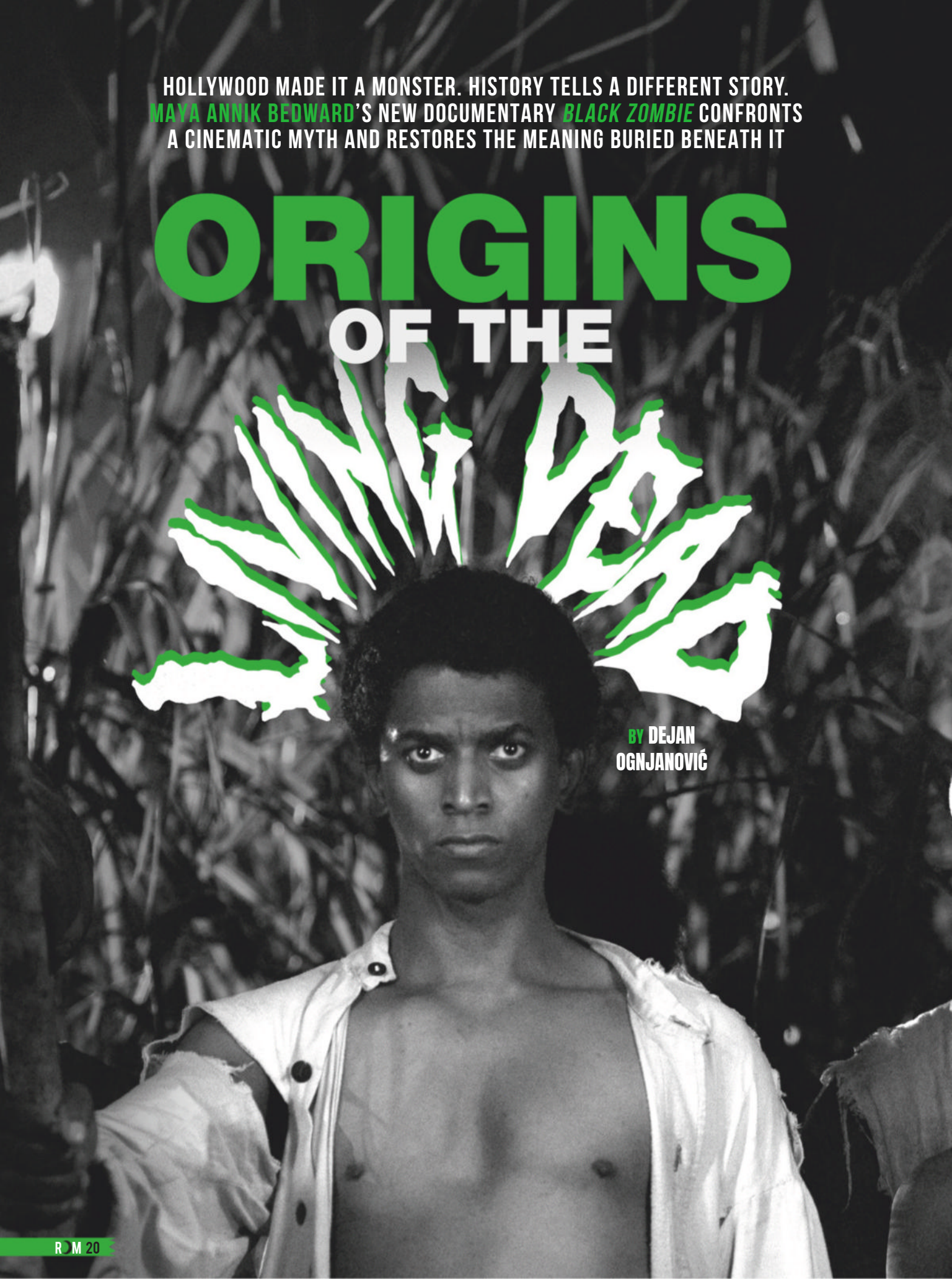
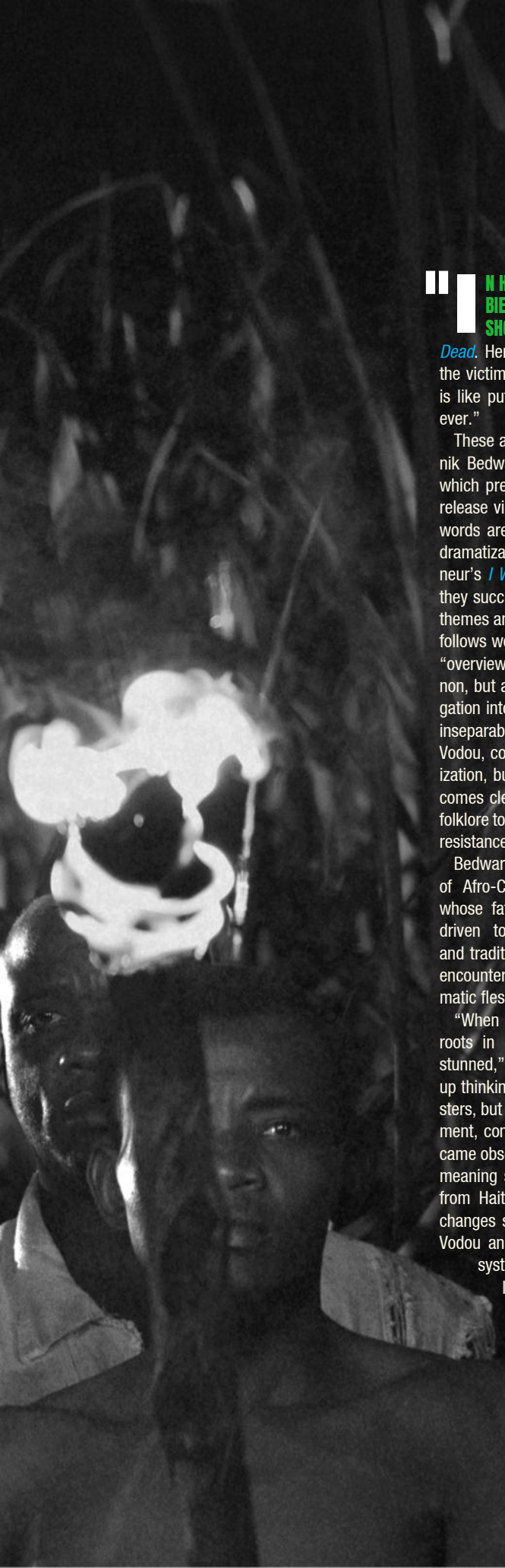
HOLLYWOOD MADE IT A MONSTER. HISTORY TELLS A DIFFERENT STORY. MAYA ANNIK BEDWARD'S NEW DOCUMENTARY *BLACK ZOMBIE* CONFRONTS A CINEMATIC MYTH AND RESTORES THE MEANING BURIED BENEATH IT

ORIGINS OF THE ZOMBIE

BY DEJAN OGNJANOVIĆ





"IN HAITI, EVERYONE TALKS ABOUT ZOMBIES. BUT IT'S NOT LIKE WHAT THEY SHOW ON TV. IT'S NOT *THE WALKING DEAD*. Here, zombies are real. Zombies are the victims. Turning someone into a zombie is like putting them back into slavery. Forever."

These are the opening words of Maya Annik Bedward's documentary *Black Zombie*, which premiered at SXSW and is slated for release via Raven Banner this summer. The words are narrated over a black-and-white dramatization inspired by Jacques Tourneur's *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), and they succinctly introduce the documentary's themes and approach, announcing that what follows won't be yet another sensationalistic "overview" of the zombie horror phenomenon, but a thoughtful and respectful investigation into its roots and subtexts. These are inseparably linked to Africa, slavery, Haiti, Vodou, colonialism, exploitation, and victimization, but throughout *Black Zombie*, it becomes clear that the zombie's journey from folklore to film is, above all, about faith, hope, resistance, and revolution.

Bedward, a Toronto-based filmmaker of Afro-Caribbean and Canadian heritage whose father is Jamaican, has long been driven to understand cultures, histories, and traditions once believed lost, eventually encountering the forgotten roots of the cinematic flesh-eater.

"When I discovered that the zombie had roots in Haitian Vodou, I was completely stunned," she says. "Like many of us, I grew up thinking of zombies as flesh-eating monsters, but here was a version tied to enslavement, control, and the loss of agency. I became obsessed with understanding how that meaning shifted over time, how it travelled from Haiti into Hollywood, and how those changes shaped broader misconceptions of Vodou and other African diasporic spiritual systems. The deeper I went, the more layered and surprising the story became and, at a certain point, I knew I had to make this film."

While horror is inevitably evoked throughout *Black Zombie*, it is clear that analysis of the genre, as such, is not its primary concern. Bedward admits that prior to making the film, she didn't watch many horror movies, adding that the project required extensive research in the genre and a personal goal of watching (almost) every zombie film ever made.

"Over time, I developed a real appreciation for it," she says. "Horror has the potential to tell powerful stories that engage with social issues in ways that feel immediate, emotional, and deeply meaningful."

Black Zombie is a potent reminder of the unfortunate fact that many horror films help create and perpetuate false representations of real, living traditions, Vodou being just one among many. The doc's title addresses this fact through its inversion of 1932's *White Zombie* – widely cited as cinema's first use of the "zombie" motif – and reclaiming the African (and, later, Haitian) tradition which spawned it. The Bela Lugosi starrer is a textbook example of how Hollywood tended to reshape zombie mythology through a colonial lens.

"The film literally centres on a white woman who is turned into a zombie and features Bela Lugosi as the controlling figure, drawing on distorted and sensationalized ideas of Vodou," Bedward points out. "What's significant is that this is widely considered the first zombie film in Hollywood. It marks the moment the zombie enters popular cinema, and from the very beginning, the story is reframed through a very different lens."

An important part of the documentary tells the story of how *White Zombie* was inspired by American explorer and traveller William Seabrook's 1929 book *The Magic Island*. Its claims – and their cinematic variations – are presented through animations, re-enactments, film clips, comic imagery, dramatizations, and a series of exclusive interviews.

Bedward taps Kaiama L. Glover, professor of French and African studies, for example, who explains the context of Haiti's turbulent colonial past, while the first-hand, insider perspective is provided by Vodou priests like Yves-Grégory Francois and priestesses like Mambo Labelle Déese Botanica. One of them, Erol Josué, is also an artist and performer and executive director of the National Bureau of Ethnology in Port au Prince, Haiti. Their words, alongside footage of religious practices in Haiti, effectively counter the simplifications and distortions embedded in Western misconceptions.

One of genre cinema's biggest culprits is, sadly, Wes Craven's beloved but problematic 1989 film *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (see sidebar, p.23). It was "based on" the eponymous non-fiction book by Canadian anthropologist Wade Davis, who washes his hands of the film in *Black Zombie*, saying he had "no control whatsoever" on how his extensive research was used for the script, and readily admits his primary motivation for letting Hollywood use it: "It bought me a house."

"LIKE MANY OF US, I GREW UP THINKING OF ZOMBIES AS FLESH-EATING MONSTERS, BUT HERE WAS A VERSION TIED TO ENSLAVEMENT, CONTROL, AND THE LOSS OF AGENCY."

– MAYA ANNIK BEDWARD

Controversial examples aside, the zombie subgenre has a very long and rich history, and still flourishes in the present, and Bedward admits it was a true challenge to make the selection of what to include or exclude in her documentary.

"For me, the selection really came down to what best served the central thesis of the film," she says. "I focused on works that engage with Black culture, Black spiritual practices, and violence enacted on Black bodies, as well as films that help trace the zombie's journey from Haiti to Hollywood and into mass popular culture. I was especially interested in the moments where that shift happens – where the meaning of the zombie starts to change, and where the deeper historical context becomes obscured or lost. Those were the films that felt essential to include."

Vodou Askew: *Often cited as the first-ever zombie movie, Victor Halperin's* ***White Zombie*** *(1932) features a love triangle of white characters at a sugar plantation in Haiti.*

Of course, this inevitably led to a significant amount of material that didn't make it in, so don't be surprised if your favourite zombie fare isn't discussed in *Black Zombie*.

"Once you start going down the zombie rabbit hole, you realize just how expansive and varied the genre is," notes Bedward. "There were many more films that could have been part of the conversation, but I had to stay focused on the story I was trying to tell."

Another challenge for the project was choosing the participants who would be speaking. Some are inevitable usual suspects for the subject, such as Tom Savini, and even George A. Romero revived through archival footage. Other experts may seem surprising, like rock god Slash from Guns N' Roses.

"I knew I needed film experts who could help trace the history of the zombie in cinema and unpack those misrepresentations," notes Bedward. "I was looking for people who were not just knowledgeable, but also charismatic and able to bridge different

WES CRAVEN'S AMBITIOUS FORAY INTO HAITIAN FOLKLORE DREW STRAIGHT FROM WADE DAVIS' ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH, BUT STUDIO PRESSURES TURNED *THE SERPENT AND THE RAINBOW* INTO ONE OF HORROR'S MOST CONFLICTED MISFIRES

DISTORTING THE DEAD

BY **ANDREA SUBISSATI**

EVEN AMONG THE MOST ARDENT FANS OF WES CRAVEN, *THE SERPENT AND THE RAINBOW* STANDS OUT AS SOMETHING of an oddity. By that point well established in his career, Craven had made a name for himself as a filmmaker of intellect and imagination – a thoughtful creative who sought to inject universal themes of intergenerational anxiety and fractured family units into his fright fare. When he was offered *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, based on ethnobotanist Wade Davis' 1985 nonfiction book of the same name, he saw it as an opportunity to introduce Western audiences to the zombie within its real cultural context – one they had rarely, if ever, seen before.

What resulted, after a gruelling shoot on location in Haiti and studio pressure to amplify the horror elements, is messy at best and – at worst – a cringingly retrograde piece of work that ultimately undermines any good-faith intentions behind the project.

"I think *The Serpent and the Rainbow* is a powerful example of how film can shape our understanding of the world," says Maya Annik Bedward, writer and director of *Black Zombie*. "That power can have both positive and negative consequences, which is why it's so important to be critical of how films are made, who is telling these stories, and what their intentions are."

In Davis' account, he is sent to Haiti as a student of ethnobotany to investigate the case of Clairvius Narcisse, who was declared legally dead, buried, and later reportedly seen wandering near his village. Davis' research not only explores the existence of a powerful neurotoxin capable of inducing a deathlike state, but also outlines the Haitian belief system surrounding zombification as a form of socio-spiritual punishment, in which a person's spirit is believed to be captured by a Vodou practitioner, leaving behind a body stripped of will.

In Craven's film, Bill Pullman assumes Davis' role as Dennis Alan, a man who travels to Haiti in search of knowledge but instead encounters violence, corruption, intimidation, black magic, a tokenized romantic interest, and a deeply erroneous depiction of an already demonized culture.

"What *The Serpent and the Rainbow* gets fundamentally wrong is that it reduces Vodou to something to fear – something malicious and dangerous," Bedward explains. "It presents it as a dark, sinister force when, in reality, that's a trope. Even in the book, Vodou isn't inherently something to fear. It's a legitimate and complex spiritual practice, rooted in a rich system of beliefs that combine West African traditions with local Indigenous knowledge and practices. It encompasses healing, herbal medicine, and a deep connection to the ancestral realm. It's about serving the spirits, who are part of a vast and intricate pantheon with their own stories, meanings, and symbolism."

Every cinematic genre is rife with examples of themes and perspectives that haven't aged well, and while Bedward's documentary problematizes the racist and negative depictions of Haitian Vodou in *The Serpent and the Rainbow* and beyond, she remains optimistic that cinema can move past these portrayals by allowing members of these communities to tell their own stories.

"It will take a range of narratives to begin undoing the harm and simplifications that have built up over decades," she says, "and, ultimately, Vodou itself should not be the source of fear. Films like *Sinners* gesture toward a different approach, where spiritual practice brings depth, understanding, and sensitivity to the story rather than functioning as something to fear."

"The path forward is clear," she concludes. "We need to support more Black filmmakers, and especially Haitian filmmakers, to tell these stories. Imagine what becomes possible when the people with a direct relationship to the culture and the faith are the ones shaping how it's represented on screen."

"IT'S NOT ABOUT FEAR OR SPECTACLE... IT'S ABOUT COMMUNITY, SPIRITUALITY, AND CONNECTION."

– MAYA ANNIK BEDWARD

parts of the story, connecting film history with broader cultural and historical context. Tananarive Due, for example, brings a deep understanding of zombie cinema while also speaking powerfully about the misrepresentation of Vodou and Black spirituality in film. And then there is Slash, who might seem like a surprising inclusion, but made total sense to me. He has a genuine love for *Night of the Living Dead*, which is central to the film, and also a personal connection to Vodou through his mother."

As usually happens, some names were planned for inclusion but couldn't make it. Jordan Peele was at the top of the director's wish list, in part because she considers *Get Out* a zombie film.

"At its core, it's about the loss of agency, about having your body controlled by someone else, which directly echoes the original concept of the Haitian zombie," she explains. "I was also really interested in the original ending of *Get Out*, which referenced *Night of the Living Dead*, where the protagonist is killed by the police. That ending speaks to a long-standing trope in horror where Black characters are denied escape or survival. The fact that [Peele] chose to change it after test screenings, and instead gave his lead a way out, felt really significant to me."

Black Zombie also addresses the fact that many horror films favour shocks and sensationalist effects, at best ignoring (and at worst, falsifying) the subtext. Of course, there is also a minority of zombie films which exemplify awareness of the issues of race, class, and history. Looking for an example of a film which keeps the "message" and genre entertainment in balance, Bedward has one at the ready: Mati Diop's 2009 short film *Atlantique*.

"It's not a traditional zombie film, but it uses a kind of spectral return to explore the migrant crisis," she says. "Young men leave Senegal in search of work and disappear at sea, only to return as ghostly presences. Through this, the film speaks to labour exploitation, economic inequality, and the emotional toll on the communities left behind. The 'zombie' here isn't a monster, but a figure of absence, of unfinished journeys, of lives caught between worlds. What I find so striking is that the film never feels didactic. It's atmospheric and visually stunning and yet carries a deep political weight."

After seeing *Black Zombie*, audiences may find it difficult to return to zombie films with the same lens. The director admits that is a goal of the doc, while also shining light on a misunderstood belief system that Hollywood has had plenty of fun with over the decades.

"I hope audiences begin to see the zombie differently and understand its roots in Haiti," she says. "That connection is so often unknown or overlooked, and yet it's central to why Vodou is so widely misunderstood. I hope viewers also come away recognizing that Vodou is not what it's often portrayed to be. It's not about fear or spectacle, and it's not 'black magic.' It's about community, spirituality, and connection. It was also a foundational force in one of the most important events in Black liberation history, the Haitian Revolution."

Black Zombie uses respect, compassion, and knowledge to shed a much-needed light on a maligned and misrepresented tradition. In its documentary form, it aims to do for the emancipatory potential of Black horror what *Get Out* has done as a fictional horror feature.

"Ultimately, I hope the film encourages a shift in perspective – to move away from demonizing African diasporic religious systems like Vodou and instead approach them with curiosity, respect, and a deeper understanding of their history," she concludes. "And maybe even to rethink how Haiti itself is seen, not just through the lens of crisis and headlines, but through its legacy of resistance, culture, and profound historical significance."

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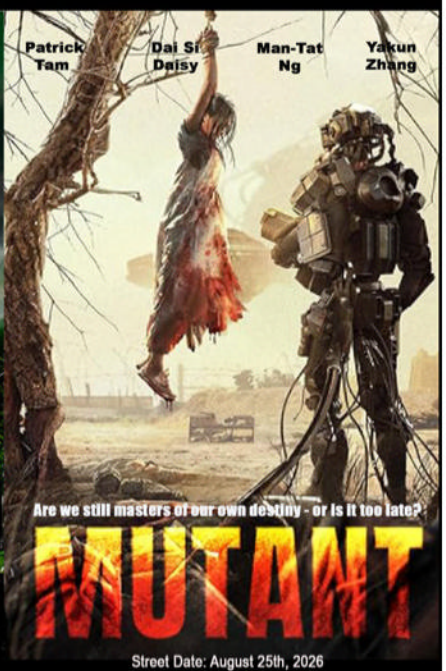

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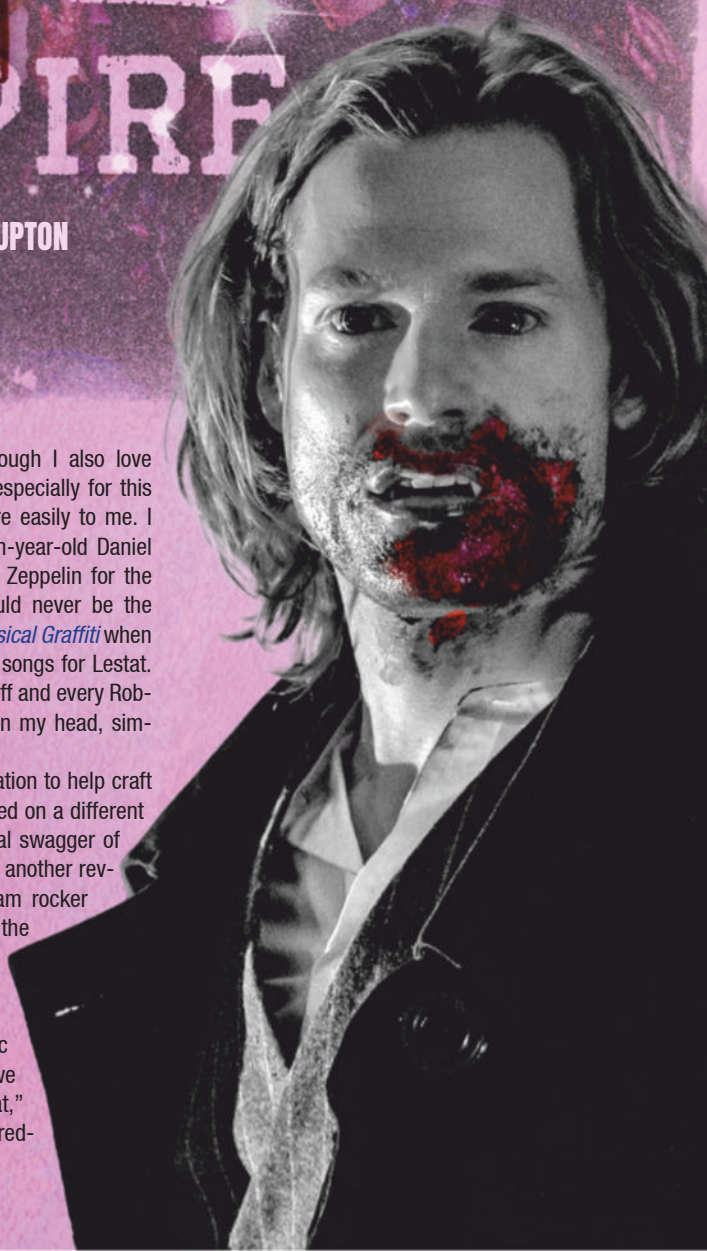
ORIGINAL SONGS. REAL PERFORMANCES. ANNE RICE'S BRAT PRINCE STEPS INTO THE SPOTLIGHT AS A TRUE GLAM ROCK FORCE IN SEASON THREE OF *INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE*

ROCK GOD VAMPIRE

BY AARON VON LUPTON



EVEN THE MOST DIEHARD FANS OF ANNE RICE'S *VAMPIRE CHRONICLES* HAVE TO ADMIT THAT THE DECISION TO TURN THE 18th-century vampire Lestat into a rock star in the '80s was a bold move. The Brat Prince's musical career was adapted to the big screen in 2002's *Queen of the Damned* as a '90s goth nu-metal act, but he's about to go full glam in the highly anticipated third season of AMC's *Interview with the Vampire*, courtesy of original music by Daniel Hart.

Premiering June 7 on AMC, Season Three takes the title *The Vampire Lestat* to correspond with the literary timeline and brings the tumultuous relationship between Lestat de Lioncourt (Sam Reid) and Louis de Pointe du Lac (Jacob Anderson) into the modern day, with Lestat indulging in his usual hedonistic excesses while chasing his various "muses" as a Bowie-esque rock god.

"I spent most of my twenties and half of my thirties on the road, playing in various bands, writing songs that were at least somewhat rock 'n' roll," says Hart about his early experience with the music industry. "Though I also love composing orchestral music, especially for this show, songwriting comes more easily to me. I had to sort of become thirteen-year-old Daniel Hart, who had just heard Led Zeppelin for the first time and whose life would never be the same afterward. I revisited *Physical Graffiti* when I was preparing to write these songs for Lestat. And every Jimmy Page guitar riff and every Robert Plant yowl was still there in my head, simmering under the surface."

Searching for musical inspiration to help craft the Lestat character, Hart landed on a different '70s icon. Instead of the sexual swagger of Zeppelin's Plant, he drew from another revolutionary, gender-bending glam rocker as his template – reflecting the sexual mutability and chameleon-like nature of the show's characters.

"For me, David Bowie's public persona is the closest thing we have to a modern-day Lestat," says Hart. "Bowie was an incred-

ible songwriter, an incomparable performer – a gender-fluid, drug-fuelled revolutionary genius who wanted to both rebel and heal through music. He was a fashion icon. He changed characters from album to album. His lyrics are often esoteric, but his melodies are completely accessible. He was complicated, messy, and wild. If that's not our Lestat, then I don't know what is."

Indeed, while Hart has a long list of film and TV scores under his belt (*The Exorcist* TV series and A24's *The Green Knight*, to name a few), he's also released albums of his own (one solo, as well as with bands The Physics of Meaning and Dark Rooms) and toured with acts such as Broken Social Scene, Swans, and St. Vincent.

For the new season, AMC Networks and Lakeshore Records have pushed hard on positioning Lestat as a real musical act in the truest sense: not only does Reid perform the songs written by Hart, "The Vampire Lestat" already has its own artist profile on streaming services like Spotify and Amazon Music. The show released Lestat's first single, "Long Face," earlier this year, on Friday, February 13, to a convention full of rabid fans, alongside a lyric video. It's a full three-minute track that mixes crunchy, swaggering garage rock guitars with Reid's sneering vocals. It's so authentic to the mood and era, you can practically smell the spandex.

Interview With The Glampire: *Sam Reid returns in* ***The Vampire Lestat****, performing new original songs by show composer Daniel Hart, written in the spirit of a young David Bowie.*

"DAVID BOWIE'S PUBLIC PERSONA IS THE CLOSEST THING WE HAVE TO A MODERN-DAY LESTAT."

– DANIEL HART, COMPOSER

"'Long Face' was the first song I wrote for *The Vampire Lestat*," says Reid. "I wrote it in the summer of 2024, about a month before we premiered it at San Diego Comic-Con. I don't remember trying to make it anything particular – I didn't start by saying, 'Why don't I write a '70s glam rock song?' I believe I did start by opening with a 'La Marseillaise' guitar solo, because the Lestat I knew would think that was funny – that it was a clever tribute to Jimi Hendrix."

Further tantalizing fans was a follow-up single released in mid-March. "All Fall Down" will serve as the title track for the new season, with Lestat effectively introducing himself to the music world through lyrics that portend danger: "I'm the little killer / I'm the lonely one / I'm the chill creepin' up your spine / Tellin' you to run."

Hart's take on the character's musical career is a far cry from *Queen of the Damned*, where Korn frontman Jonathan Davis was tapped to compose the soundtrack and perform as Lestat's singing voice (while Stuart Townsend portrayed the character). But just as *Interview with the Vampire* showrunner Rolin Jones took several creative risks with his bold interpretation of Anne Rice's source material, Hart immersed himself completely in his role as composer – sitting in on the writers' room to fully understand the nuances of the plotline, and even going so far as to write a scene to keep his inspiration focused.

"The bulk of the songwriting happened between November 2024 and March 2025, while I was in the writers' room working on scripts," he says. "During that time, I wrote a whole scene in which Lestat discusses Bowie and his musical influences (from T. Rex to Willie Dixon to Bach) as part of an interview with [reporter] Daniel Molloy. That scene never made it to any final script, but it did keep Bowie at the front of my thoughts as I continued to write these songs, even when they didn't sound anything like a typical Bowie song."

After three seasons on the show, Hart is now an intimate part of Lestat. Rarely is a show's composer so deeply involved with a character – not to mention the actor behind them. Working closely with Reid, Hart was challenged to write songs that were not only appropriate for Lestat as a musician, but for Reid as a performer.

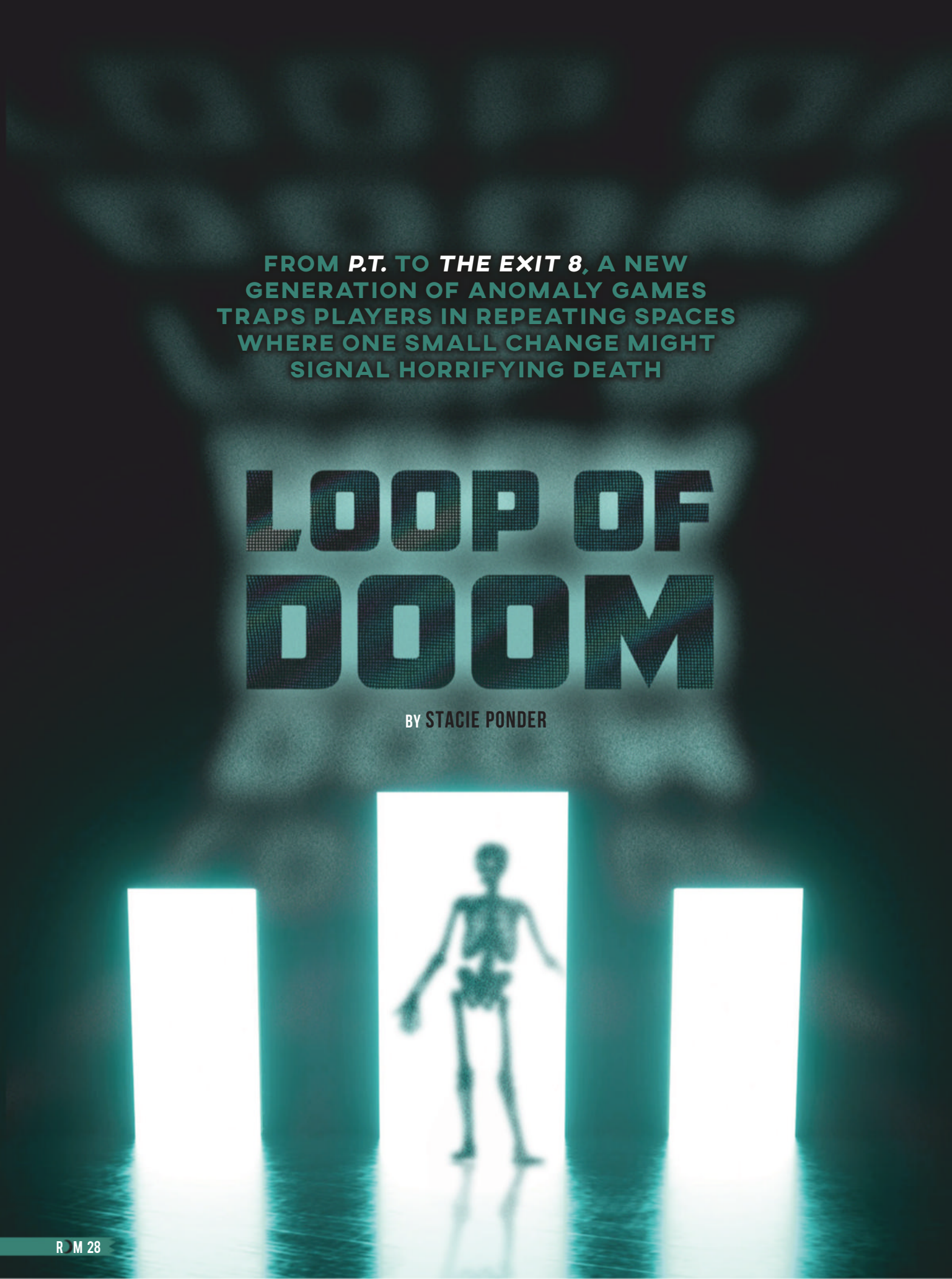
"He has such a beautiful, expressive baritone," says Hart. "He has specific ideas about who Lestat is – and who knows Lestat de Lioncourt better than Sam Reid at this point? There was plenty of back and forth between us – about lyrics, vocal performance and phrasing. And then there were moments in every session where we found something unexpected, where Sam delivered a take imbued with so much passion that I wanted to jump out of my seat. I really enjoyed having a front-row seat to what was essentially a private performance by the Vampire Lestat. It's not easy to sing well at all – but to sing well in character? I have deep admiration for Sam Reid and everything he accomplished this season."

Viewers will have their own front-row seat this summer. Let the show begin.

FROM *P.T.* TO *THE EXIT 8*, A NEW GENERATION OF ANOMALY GAMES TRAPS PLAYERS IN REPEATING SPACES WHERE ONE SMALL CHANGE MIGHT SIGNAL HORRIFYING DEATH

LOOP OF DOOM

BY STACIE PONDER



YOU'RE WALKING DOWN A LONG, WINDING HALLWAY MARKED "3." YOU'VE BEEN HERE BEFORE, AND YOU'RE WONDERING WHAT'S CHANGED since the last time. Has there always been a framed photo of a woman on the wall? Is the text on the poster further down the same as it ever was? Everything seems normal, so you walk through the door at the end of the hall – only to emerge in the same hallway, now marked with a 1. Damn. Rounding a corner, it's not hard to guess whether anything is different this time, as a torrent of blood crashes toward you like you're a guest at the Overlook Hotel. You turn around and head back the way you came, and somehow you're back at the start of the hallway once more, relieved to see it marked with a 2.

No, you're not trapped in one of the trippier episodes of *Twin Peaks*. Lynchian though it may seem, this particular nightmare is known as an anomaly video game.

Most of us remember the childhood challenge of spotting the differences between two nearly identical pictures. An anomaly game expands that idea into an eerie gameplay loop. The player enters or observes an environment and reports any anomalies. Report correctly and you advance a stage or level. Report incorrectly or miss one and it's back to the beginning for a do-over – or in some cases, it's game over. It sounds easy, but at times it's maddeningly difficult, and it's generally rather addictive.

"OVERLOOK THREE OR MORE ANOMALIES, AND IT'S GAME OVER."

When tracing the roots of any given horror subgenre, it can be tricky to name a single progenitor. But in the case of modern horror gaming, it's difficult to deny the impact of *P.T.*, the infamous "Playable Teaser" meant to showcase the puzzles and scares of the next *Silent Hill* installment, *Silent Hills*. Co-directed by maverick game developer Hideo Kojima (*Death Stranding*, *Metal Gear*) and horror cinema's own Guillermo del Toro, *P.T.* was announced out of the blue at the August 2014 German trade show Gamescom and immediately became one of gaming's most terrifying sensations. The player character wakes up in a dimly-lit room, then must navigate a looping L-shaped hallway and solve obtuse, complex puzzles in order to break the loop and escape, all the while being menaced by a nightmarish spectre named Lisa. It was, as *Devil May Cry* director Hideki Kamiya noted on social media, "completely unique and without precedent."

Die, Die, Repeat: *The anomaly loop format of 2014's* ***Playable Teaser*** *(top) has influenced horror gaming in numerous ways, including the 2018 surveillance-survival sim series* ***I'm on Observation Duty*** *(bottom).*

By April 2015, a dispute between Kojima and publisher Konami Digital Entertainment saw *Silent Hills* cancelled and *P.T.* pulled from the PlayStation store, rendering it impossible to download, but the impression it left on gamers and gamemakers alike was undeniable. Many horror games that followed in its wake pinched its oppressive atmosphere and first-person POV – including Capcom for *Resident Evil 7: Biohazard*, which went so far as to release a playable teaser of its own called *Beginning Hour*. But *P.T.*'s closed-space looping structure, which required puzzle-solving to advance "levels," would provide a template for a growing trend of anomaly games to follow in the subsequent decade. "We should definitely remember *P.T.* as the originator of that design," continued Kamiya.

Nearly as influential in the subgenre is the series *I'm on Observation Duty*, which began in 2018 as the work of a single developer who goes by the handle Notovia. If *P.T.* cemented the exploration-style anomaly game (meaning players move through an environment, often in first-person), then *I'm on Observation Duty* is, as the title intimates, the originator of the observation style. Games of this sort assign players to a six-hour "shift" at their job, monitoring surveillance cameras mounted throughout a particular location, such as a hotel, an office complex, or a train.

Armed with sharp eyes and a good memory, you cycle through the feeds looking for anomalies. Sometimes they are obvious: a headless "intruder" shuffling towards the camera, or a room filled with a ghostly fog. More often, though, the changes are subtle. A pair of shoes might be facing in a different direction, or the words on a sign may have changed. It's more difficult – and far more nerve-shredding – than it might sound. The anticipation of what might await in every new screen ratchets up as you flick from one camera to the next, as does the tension from going too long without spotting anything amiss. Overlook three or more anomalies, and it's game over.

It's a simple formula that proved successful. *I'm on Observation Duty 8* released late last year, and Notovia now oversees a small team of developers who implement his vision for the ongoing series.

The effectiveness of the conceit combined with the simplicity of programming anomaly games also served as a huge influence on another solo developer, Kotake Create, who wanted to craft a short game with a short turnaround time. Citing *I'm on Observation Duty*, *P.T.*, Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*, and the 2021 looping adventure game *Twelve Minutes* as inspirations, Kotake released *The Exit 8* (often shortened to

The Exit 8

Exit 8) in November 2023 after just nine months of development. Set in the Japanese underground, the player – in first-person perspective – navigates long, sterile, brightly-lit corridors, looking for those fabled anomalies. If nothing is amiss, the player advances. If oddities are present, the player must turn back to advance a level in the loop. The goal is to reach level 8, where the titular exit is found.

Kotake Create wanted to keep the formula simple, concentrating on the key concepts of being placed in a loop and searching for strange happenings through underground passages. But the simplicity of *Exit 8*, along with its unsettling vibes and famously creepy "salaryman" character, helped make it a bona fide smash hit. In its native Japan, it caught on quickly and has sold over 2 million copies. It's also been adapted into a novel and a film – unexpected, perhaps, for a game that features no narrative beyond whatever the player makes up in their own mind. But that uncanny atmosphere is an undeniably enticing hook, one that keeps players on edge and translates well to other media.

Occasionally, certain video games will prove so popular and influential in terms of design that they become an entire subgenre unto themselves: *Souls*-like games, for example, are action-RPGs that take after *Demon's Souls* and the *Dark Souls* trilogy, featuring a high difficulty and dark fantasy settings. A Metroidvania focuses on non-linear exploration, and is a portmanteau of the games it followed, *Metroid* and *Castlevania*. *Exit 8* spawned so many copycats that it, too, gave rise to its own subgenre, the *Exit 8*-like (though Kamiya argues it should actually be called "*P.T.*-like"). Spotting the copycats is easy: *Finnish Cottage 8*, *Platform 8*, *Exit Slum 11*, *Project 13*, *Station 5*… the list goes on and on.

Still, there are many contemporary anomaly games that build on the core concept in interesting (and increasingly chilling) ways to expand the subgenre beyond *Exit 8*'s simple structure. One of the scariest is 2024's *The Cabin Factory* [*RM#228*], wherein players take on a job inspecting a series of cabins that are haunted house attractions in order to determine which (if any) are actually haunted. Each cramped space, which looks like something straight out of *The Evil Dead*, features a family of mannequins – clearly a jump scare waiting to happen, keeping the player on edge. Correctly designate eight cabins in a row as haunted or not haunted to complete your workday and piece together the story of the doomed denizens lurking inside.

While the majority of anomaly games are scant on plot, there is, oddly enough, a consistent thematic element that courses through many of them: the dire financial straits brought on by capitalism. These games often task players with working a blue-collar shift at an office or a factory or monitoring camera feeds for a mysterious or shady organization. The environments are terrifying, if not outright haunted, and the player can be menaced by all manner of beings both corporeal and supernatural. *Office After Hours* takes the idea to its natural extreme, pairing the hell of repetitive menial office work with… well, Hell itself.

At times, the games directly comment on the idea that a person would have to work that kind of nightmare gig to make ends meet. In *Dollmare* (2024), players begin a job as a doll inspector at the Sweet Cheeks Toy Factory, spending their shift in a bleak warehouse, replacing an employee who recently disappeared. The job gets increasingly complex as new machines (and new scares) are added every day, making it more difficult to catch errors. "Why do I keep coming back?" the player asks in on-screen text. "People whisper about [the factory's] shady reputation, but I don't care. I just need the money." The possibility of losing wages only adds to the stress and the tension of the game.

Another recent game, *The Devil is in the Details* (2024), is perhaps the final boss of the anomaly game, one that offers the most evolved and comprehensive experience in the subgenre thus far. Set in a haunted mansion overseen by a puppet called The Arbiter and filled with gothic tchotchkes, players must spend an "observation phase" studying the house and any number of highlighted cursed objects within. Then begins a "ritual phase" during which the player must mark what's changed. Finally, there is judgment – resulting in advancement or failure – by The Arbiter. The game can become outright chaotic as you advance; there are enemies, pranks (such as losing control of your character), and "much, much worse" things to deal with as you try to memorize objects throughout the ever-changing house… as a timer ticks down. It's part anomaly game, part survival horror, part escape room, and all spooky.

It's easy to see why something like *The Devil is in the Details* works but the truth is, all anomaly games are worthwhile to varying extents. They are cheap to develop and cheap to purchase, most available on Steam for just a couple of bucks. Unlike sprawling open-world RPGs, anomaly games demand little disk space or time (speedrunners have completed *Exit 8* in under 90 seconds!) and are often meant to be played in a single sitting, rendering setbacks and losses inconsequential. The sound design and repeating liminal spaces tap into the inherent unease of the uncanny – that feeling that something is off, that something is perhaps waiting around a corner or even right behind us. The simple formula and the potential for nerve-jangling jump scares are ready-made for the age of streamers and reaction videos, all but ensuring that the trend won't die out anytime soon. In fact, it's possible that at least eight more anomaly games were published in the time it took you to read this article. See if you can spot the differences.

FACE OF HALLOWEEN

Bloody Brilliant

Ollie Graves

Story & Photography by Sydney Cisco

Colossal's Face of Halloween unites freaks and fans for a scary-good showdown, doubling as an online fundraiser for Starlight Children's Foundation, raising $3.2 million in 2025 to support their mission to deliver happiness to seriously ill kids and their families.

In the end, only one champion could be crowned...

A Coven of Characters

Ollie Graves has always danced with the darkness as a professional scare actor and circus siren, but don't be fooled by her haunting gaze. This horror queen radiates good vibes. "There cannot be darkness without the light," she says, leading with kindness in a chaotic world. In Nashville, she shape-shifts from ghoul to guru—teaching, performing, and terrorizing at Nashville Nightmare Haunted House and beyond. As the reigning champion, Ollie savors not just the win but the thrill of participating in a collective action that sparks positive change.

@__olliegraves__

FEATURING
Kane Hodder

Nikki Hunt

Maine-based, self-taught transformation queen Nikki Hunt turns horror into her runway. A licensed cosmetologist and SFX artist, she handcrafts jaw-dropping metamorphoses, vanishing into each look. Ethereal or glam-grotesque, Nikki proves Halloween isn't a costume. It's a calling.

@therealnikkihunt

Shannah Sutton-Porter

Utah's Shannah Sutton-Porter is a college student, caretaker, and occasional 'killer clown.' A two-time third-place Face of Halloween finalist, her sister's health journey fuels her heart for the fundraising competition, inspiring her to discover her power.

@halloweenkillerqueen

Evan Zimmerman

After 19 years in the U.S. Air Force and union insulator, Evan Zimmerman clocks in after hours as Decatur's Michael Myers, going viral for spot-on cosplay, and his wife, Sabrina's, priceless reactions, plus passing '80s slasher thrills to his mini-Myers.

@michaelmyersofdecatur

POWERED BY COLOSSAL

starlight children's foundation

Colossal, the professional fundraiser that powers Face of Halloween, is proud to have raised $3.2 million in 2025 to support DTCare, which grants funds to Starlight Children's Foundation. This 501(c)(3) organization delivers happiness to seriously ill children and their families through vital programs that impact millions of kids annually.

www.starlight.org | www.colossal.org

Designed by: Jacqueline Guardiola | Styled by: Sébastien Hohl | Stylist Assistant: Will Gomez
HMUA: Julie Hassett | HMUA Assistant: Heather Galipo

ROOM WITH A BOO

HOKUM

Starring Adam Scott, Peter Coonan and David Wilmot
Written and directed by Damian Mc Carthy
Neon

The fear factor in Damian Mc Carthy's previous *Caveat* and *Oddity* was defined to no small degree by their particular and chilling senses of place. That carries through into *Hokum*, which is set in what is arguably the scariest hotel since *The Shining*.

The Bilberry Woods Hotel, off in a remote part of Ireland, is the destination of Ohm Bauman (Adam Scott), an author wrestling with the completion of his latest book and the shadows of his past. His mission is to dispose of the ashes of his deceased parents, and he's none too friendly or polite to the Bilberry Woods staff. Yet Scott gives the role enough humanity behind Ohm's inner struggle and conflict, and Mc Carthy builds such intriguing mystery and foreboding into Bilberry Woods, that you want to follow Ohm as he goes into places he probably shouldn't. In this case, it's the hotel's Honeymoon Suite, which is said to be haunted by an ancient witch and contains decor and items that – like the rest of Til Frohlich's production design – are remarkably tactile and vividly creepy.

Mc Carthy's storyline repeatedly heads off in directions you don't expect. An event discussed early on seems like it's being set up as a major set piece, only to be elided in favour of a very startling development – though its aftermath nonetheless becomes a key story component. The writer/director further engages us by having Bilberry Woods' elderly owner Cobb (Brendan Conroy) tell a story about the witch as Ohm first arrives, and then eschewing further exposition, suggesting additional details by showing, not telling. And on a more basic level, he delivers a hell of a good jump-scare at more than one point of Ohm's journey.

An extremely well-chosen cast of Irish character actors, rich photography by Colm Hogan, and an enveloping, eerie sonic atmosphere courtesy of composer Joseph Bishara and sound designer Steve Fanagan all contribute to a trip into the otherworldly that's well worth taking.

MICHAEL GINGOLD

RAGE AGAINST THE BEAUTY MACHINE

FRANKIE, MANIAC WOMAN

Starring Dina Silva, Stefanie Estes and Jordan Kelly Debarge
Directed by Pierre Tsigaridis
Written by Dina Silva and Pierre Tsigaridis
Two Witches Films

An instant cult classic that would fit incredibly well in the grooves of the midnight movie scene, *Frankie, Maniac Woman* has a grindhouse feel that tips a hat to the likes of Tobe Hooper and John Waters. A violent, brutal, and grisly flick, *Frankie* is also not without an ironic sense of humour… delivering the gory goods without being heavy-handed about its more real subject matter.

Co-writer Dina Silva plays Frances Ramirez, a zaftig musician and singer struggling with self-image following a lifetime of formative conditioning, female competitiveness, and the pressures of societal standards, which bring her to a truly disturbing breaking point. Donning a pretty-girl mask and reimagining herself as "Frankie," she goes on a rampage against anyone who has ever made her feel less-than, cutting a bloody swath of vengeance through Hollywood against the many patriarchal forces that would seek to keep her down.

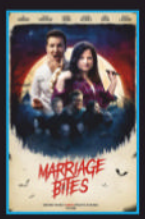
In spite of its midnight movie splatter delights, *Frankie, Maniac Woman* is forcefully confrontational and uncomfortable, and importantly so. The scenes of judgement and stereotyping are equally as distressing as watching someone having his head smashed in with a heavy metal weight. Silva is fantastic in portraying a sympathetic (if flawed) woman who is tortured on multiple levels throughout the course of the film; at the same time, she pulls appropriate rage from seemingly benign pleasantries as easily as if she were breathing.

Frankie, Maniac Woman tackles how society often frowns upon simply being a woman and – while the film isn't perfect – it is honest, and its rough edges only serve to drive its messaging home even harder. It's a poignant, razor sharp,

OVERLOOKED, FORGOTTEN AND DISMISSED

THIS ISSUE: LANCE FILES FOR DIVORCE

BLOOD IS THICKER THAN WEDDING VOWS



MARRIAGE BITES

One Dream Productions

Marriage isn't easy – take it from someone who's been around that altar a few times – but it's downright relaxing compared to the chaos in *Marriage Bites*. This scrappy horror comedy follows newlywed Martin, who gets turned into a vampire and then tries to keep it under wraps while resisting the urge to snack on his wife. Cue late-night Googling of vampire support groups, questionable meat smoothies, and a secret that leaks worse than a dollar-store tampon. It sounds like domestic doom, but the film lands thanks to sharp performances, genuinely funny banter, and enough splatter to keep seasoned gorehounds happy. So, sit back and enjoy with your fiancé(e) – just keep your fangs to yourself, you freak.

BODY COUNT: 14

BEST DRINKING GAME: A shot every time you see a set of fangs

GHOST BRIDE WANTS CUSTODY

DEAD BRIDE

Breaking Glass Pictures

Even as a child, Alyson suffered from brutal nightmares and sleep paralysis she couldn't escape. Now grown, the night terrors come back tenfold when she returns to her childhood home after her father's death. Things spiral fast when she starts seeing terrifying shit while wide awake. Naturally, her useless asshat of a husband stays skeptical – and spectacularly unhelpful – until their infant gets snatched by a paranormal entity that might be the vengeful ghost of a murdered bride looking to start a family of her own. Can Alyson succeed where cops, priests, and psychics all fail and drag her baby back into her already doomed marriage? Stick around and find out. This Italian import is slickly shot and powered by a thunderously ominous orchestral score that could spook you right out of that spaghetti dinner your loved one prepared on Valentine's Day.

BODY COUNT: 8

BEST DRINKING GAME: A shot every time a baby cries

PATTERSON AND GIMLIN DIED FOR THIS

BIGFOOT'S BRIDE

Wildeye Releasing

I'm old school when it comes to my cryptids, okay? I grew up during the Bigfoot craze of the early '70s when the famous (and genuinely creepy) Patterson-Gimlin footage surfaced, showing a Sasquatch sauntering across Bluff Creek in Northern California with her big ol' furry tatas out for all to see. I was transfixed. This travesty of a film, alas, flushes all that hard-earned mystique straight down the toilet, introducing a bargain-bin Sasquatch who wears a mink stole, blue coveralls, and a military camo sniper outfit, and whose face, feet, and hands look like they were salvaged from a Spirit Halloween dumpster. Even worse, this Bigfoot speaks English. If you still wanna follow this grindhouse grotesquerie through the woods as he bashes hunters, sniffs animal pee, and falls for unlucky lady campers, don't say ol' Lance didn't warn you.

BODY COUNT: 9

BEST DRINKING GAME: A shot every time you see a fake blood spurt

LAST CHANCE LANCE

sickly funny, and downright disgusting example of how even gory horror contains themes that are worthy of stepping back and examining. Consider it a worthwhile visceral challenge!

JASON WALLACH

LOVE IS A CORPSE

BROKEN BIRD

Starring Rebecca Calder, Sacharissa Claxton and Jay Taylor
Directed by Joanne Mitchell
Written by Dominic Brunt
Catalyst Studios/Seismic Releasing

Broken Bird's opening credits play over images of avian taxidermy in progress, but it's soon evident that the title actually refers to the person performing the procedure. Rebecca Calder (*The Conjuring: Last Rites*) portrays an indelibly damaged antiheroine in this combination psycho-thriller and character study, which is as sad as it is scary.

Mourning and loss are common threads in *Broken Bird*. Calder's Sybil Chamberlain lives under the lingering tragedy of losing her entire family at age ten; Mr. Thomas (James Fleet), who hires her to work at his funeral home, is grieving the passing of his beloved wife; and policewoman Emma (Sacharissa Claxton) has been devastated by the disappearance of her young son. While Emma's descent into alcoholism threatens her job, Sybil has found the perfect place to work, given her unhealthy preoccupation with dead things. She does desire the love of the living and believes she finds a match in museum security guard Mark (Jay Taylor). That attraction is one-sided, though, and when Sybil discovers that Mark has a girlfriend, Tina (Robyn Rainsford), it's not hard to imagine that bad things will follow.

Those events don't develop the way you'll likely expect, however. Director Joanne Mitchell (expanding on her short film *Sybil*) and screenwriter Dominic Brunt progress inexorably from emotionally turbulent drama into surprisingly and uncompromisingly dark territory. Calder makes Sybil a singularly beguiling, off-kilter presence; with her gaunt features, severe bowl haircut, and birdlike mannerisms, she's a clearly damaged woman whose penchant for morbid fantasizing threatens to spill over into real-world action at any moment. Claxton mines deep wells of emotion as the distressed Emma, and while there are a few missing narrative pieces in the course of uniting her and Sybil's storylines, the sterling work by the two leads consistently holds our attention. Kudos also to the appropriately hushed cinematography by Igor Marović and convincingly fleshy prosthetics by Nenad and Katarina Gajić.

MICHAEL GINGOLD

FAILS FROM THE CRYPTID

THE YETI

Starring Brittany Allen, Eric Nelsen and Jim Cummings
Written and directed by Gene Gallerano and William Pisciotta
WellGo USA

The legendary hominid is having a moment, with its cousin Bigfoot recently showcased in *Squatch* and a big-budget *Yeti* coming from *Conjuring* franchise director Michael Chaves. This lower-budget outing has production values that give it a classy veneer, but it's largely let down by the storytelling.

In 1947 Alaskan Territory, a cabin-bound team are bloodily attacked by something unseen but large enough to reach through the roof to get at them. Soon after, venal Merriell Sunday Jr. (Eric Nelsen) assembles a group to venture to those snowy climes in search of his vanished oil-magnate dad. Among the group is cartographer Ellie Bannister (Brittany Allen), whose own explorer father Hollis is also missing. Apparently, the area they trek to is near *30 Days of Night*'s Barrow, Alaska, since they hike through perpetual gloom and darkness until they find themselves shadowed by something worse. A gigantic, ancient, hairy creature begins picking them off, and there's more to its rampage than initially meets their eyes.

The Yeti is commendably serious-minded for an indie creature feature, with a subdued tone and darkly atmospheric cinematography by Joel Froome. First-time feature writer/directors Gene Gallerano and William Pisciotta have also attempted a more character-driven film, with mixed results. There are dramatic moments that work here and there, alongside awkward character actions (and inactions). Some of the narrative beats are unconvincing as well, and certain scenes feel like they have key shots missing.

The filmmakers do have an impressive, practically created title beast (designed by Wayne Anderson) on their hands, which makes it curious that they don't give it quite enough screen time and deny it a proper payoff at the end. Similarly, viewers lured by the presence of Corbin Bernsen and William Sadler will be disappointed to see that the former doesn't show up till around the hour mark, and the latter receives even less screen time.

KEN MICHAELS

Touch Me

ADDICTED TO THE END OF THE WORLD

TOUCH ME

Starring Olivia Taylor Dudley, Lou Taylor Pucci and Jordan Gavaris
Written and directed by Addison Heimann
Yellow Veil Pictures

Horror has historically been an acceptable medium for making art about processing trauma. *Touch Me* is one of those films – under its neon-soaked, campy exterior is a human story about codependent friendships and narcissistic partners, with two Gen-Z main characters that just can't seem to get anything in life going right.

Touch Me follows best friends Joey (Olivia Taylor Dudley), a broke mentally ill young woman who has recently left a toxic relationship with an alien, and Craig (Jordan Gavaris), a queer rich kid who takes Joey under his wing following her breakup. They have questionable boundaries, no jobs to speak of, and a crippling addiction to vape pens, so when Joey's ex, the charming but otherworldly Brian (Lou Taylor Pucci), comes back into her life, Joey and Craig go to live with him in his mansion following the threat of homelessness. The friends are soon recruited for "interspecies intercourse" and become addicted to Brian's heroin-like physical touch, falling under his narcissistic spell and enacting his plan for world domination.

What follows is pure indie horror fun, with Gen-Z sensibilities and a Ryan Murphy-esque sense of humour. Craig is constantly seeking validation and making casual suicide threats, while Brian is the archetype of a sociopathic man, despite not being human. There are dance breaks, alien sex, and some well-earned head pops. On the flipside, *Touch Me* is also a story about processing trauma in real time, and what happens when we allow our personal demons to re-enter our lives. Some of the most uncomfortable moments come not from the gore (although

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ON THE SLAB: HELL IN A MOTEL

PLEASANT INN

7:14 mins/YouTube via David Romero's Channel

A young woman driving alone at night passes a solitary soul by the side of the road. She pulls over to offer a ride but thinks better of it when something about that figure in her rearview seems off. After deciding to pull into a motel for some much-needed rest, her sleep is interrupted by a scream outside… and things only get worse from there. From the nightmare-fuelled mind of artist David Romero (a.k.a. Cinemamind) comes *Pleasant Inn*. Much like his previous animated short films *Midnight Snack* and *Other Lily*, Romero continues his signature style of conveying story solely through visuals and sound design rather than spoken dialogue – although this time he is also helped by a score from Myuu (Nicolas Gasparini). His work is ever populated by spindly, misshapen creatures that evoke the best of creepypasta and other modern urban legend artists like (former *RM* intern!) Trevor Henderson. Thankfully, *Pleasant Inn* has resurfaced online after having been stolen and then removed in a YouTube controversy that was eventually reversed when the online community came to Romero's aid. It's good to know that, sometimes, the good guys still win.

GRANITE HIGHWAY

13:56 mins/YouTube via Rhys Ellis' Channel

Alice (Tori Webb) works the front desk at a lonely motel in the Australian wilderness, watching people come and go. One night, a mysterious stranger named Sam (Joel Drabble) rents a room, and she can't resist sneaking a peek into it, even though she's aware there are currently several missing women in the area. Brisbane-based writer/director Rhys Ellis based this short film largely on the folks he met on a long road trip across Australia as well as the very real disappearances that befell dozens of women around Queensland/New South Wales from 1977 to 2009. Set in the '90s to increase the feeling of isolation, Ellis utilized his small, committed crew to the fullest – particularly cinematographer Danien Berends, who seamlessly makes three separate motel locations look like the same space. After a successful festival run last year, Ellis is currently shopping *Granite Highway* as a feature film.

THE RECOVERY CALL

17:36 mins/Vimeo via Blake Winston Rice's Channel

At the behest of his sponsor, Ethan (Dan Soder) drives hours to fetch fellow AA member Grant (Evan Williams) who has fallen off the wagon and is currently on a bender at the rustic Orion Hotel. Ethan ignores the odd staff and goes about the task of getting Grant to leave with him. Easier said than done, because the drugs and alcohol aren't the only thing weighing him down. An engaging mix of *The Shining* and Justin Benson and Aaron Moorhead's 2012 debut *Resolution*, *The Recovery Call* has a lot going for it. In addition to the beautiful and atmospheric location, director Blake Winston Rice and writer Williams do a good job balancing the levity, seriousness, and the eventual chaos of the story with a pair of leads whose chemistry really shines through. Rice followed up *The Recovery Call* with *Tea* and *DISC*, which played Cannes and TIFF respectively, and is now developing his first feature called *The Empty Lot*.

JAY CLARKE

there is some great body horror akin to *Society* or *Dead Alive*) but rather from the trauma dumping that comes from the two best friends. *Touch Me* is camp horror, but also a story about love addiction, and both sides are woven together meticulously by the director and the strong cast.

RACHEL MEGHAN

THE SHAPE OF SICKNESS

ALPHA

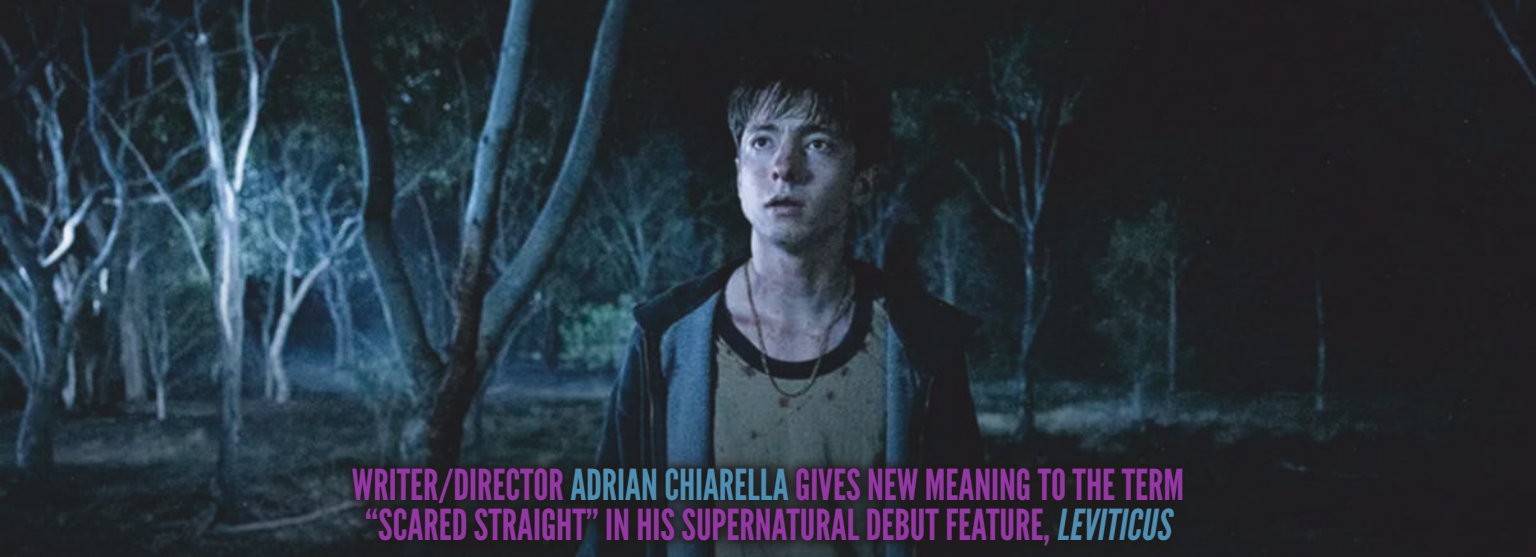
Starring Golshifteh Farahani, Tahar Rahim and Mélissa Boros
Written and Directed by Julia Ducournau
NEON

Julia Ducournau has quickly become one of contemporary horror's most singular voices; the French filmmaker first gained international attention with *Raw* (2016), a visceral coming-of-age cannibal tale, before winning the Palme d'Or for *Titane* (2021), a ferocious work of body horror that cemented her reputation for provocative, physically confronting cinema. Defined by their intense physicality and emotional extremity, Ducournau's films often use the body as a site of transformation and trauma. With *Alpha*, she once more takes an allegorical approach to her horror, reflecting on social fear, illness, and the lingering trauma of the AIDS crisis.

The film centres on thirteen-year-old Alpha (Mélissa Boros), whose life unravels after she receives a tattoo from an unsanitary needle at a chaotic house party. Soon after, rumours spread that she carries a mysterious disease, isolating her from classmates and community alike. The narrative unfolds through a tense family triangle between Alpha, her anxious mother (Golshifteh Farahani), and her troubled uncle Amin (Tahar Rahim), a heroin addict whose own past brushes with illness haunt the household. As reports of a strange, body-altering disease begin appearing across France, Ducournau blends psychological horror with unsettling bodily imagery, depicting victims whose bodies harden into porcelain-like forms. The result is less a traditional scare-driven horror film than a bleak, slow-burning nightmare about paranoia, stigma, and the fragility of the human body.

While some viewers expecting the visceral shock of *Raw* or *Titane* may find *Alpha* more restrained, the film's power lies in its emotional weight. Ducournau channels her ideas through a trio of strong performances, particularly from Rahim and Farahani, whose characters embody the lingering scars of addiction and societal shame. At times the allegory can feel heavy-handed, yet Ducournau's visual confidence and commitment to her vision remain undeniable. *Alpha* may not replicate the shock of her earlier work, but it confirms Ducournau as a filmmaker unafraid to evolve while confronting the darkest corners of human experience.

ANDERS LJUNG



WRITER/DIRECTOR ADRIAN CHIARELLA GIVES NEW MEANING TO THE TERM "SCARED STRAIGHT" IN HIS SUPERNATURAL DEBUT FEATURE, *LEVITICUS*

A DEMON CALLED DESIRE

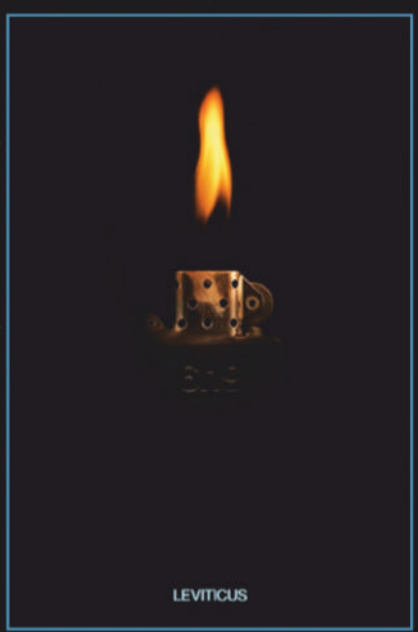
BY SEAN PLUMMER

"I WISH I COULD SAY THAT I WAS A HORROR EXPERT, BUT I'M REALLY JUST SOMEONE WHO IS A FAN."

Writer/director Adrian Chiarella makes this admission when asked about his love of scary movies, which he traces to illicit childhood viewings of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* films with his cousins. The young Australian filmmaker's background, you see, is in TV comedy and drama, not horror, but his debut film, *Leviticus*, about gay teens being stalked by a demon, is an exercise in existential terror.

"I really appreciate the fact that fear is universal," he adds. "I'm from a family of people from all different parts of the world, and comedy never really translated between cultures – but I knew that fear really did. If I told a story about something scary that happened to me on the way home from school, I'd have any listener in the palm of my hand, and the power of that was always very clear to me."

Out June 19 through NEON, *Leviticus* stars *Crimson Peak*'s Mia Wasikowska as Arlene, a single mother who moves her teenage son Naim (*Talk to Me*'s Joe Bird) to a small town following her husband's death. Arlene finds solace in the local church while Naim connects romantically with Ryan (Stacy Clausen), a closeted teen at his high school. A bad decision by Naim leads to both of them being put through a type of spiritual gay conversion ceremony at his mother's church. What seems ridiculous at first soon turns deadly as it becomes evident they are being stalked by a demon that takes the shape of that which they most desire – each other.



Growing up in Sydney in the late '90s, Chiarella's first experience of homophobia took the form of an anti-gay speech from teachers at his religious school.

"They'd quote pieces of the Bible at us, and even back then it was quite shocking," he recalls. "And then there were other moments of homophobia that sort of follow us into our adult lives, even if you're not experiencing actual violence. It's in the internalized forms; when you feel the pressure not to reach across to your partner in public and that sort of thing."

The origins of *Leviticus*, whose title comes from a Bible passage often cited as divine justification for anti-gay bigotry, came from Chiarella's desire to both make a horror movie and explore the larger cultural fear of homosexuality and queerness.

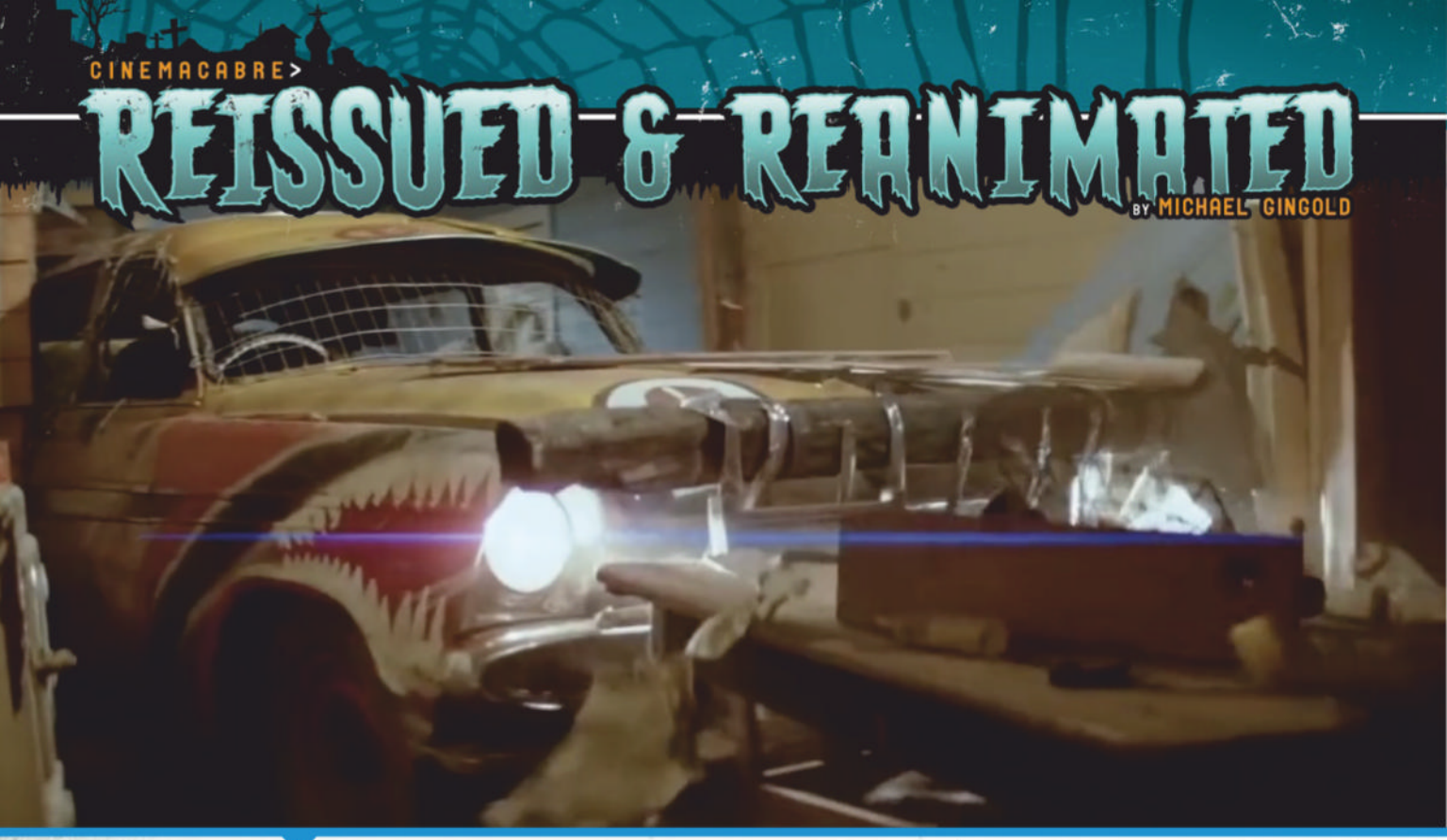
"I'd always loved the horror genre, and the more I learned about it, the more I drilled down on the fact that any horror movie is about fear at its core," he says. "And as a gay man, I think I was interested in this idea that homophobia is a type of fear. There's a clue in the word; it's a phobia. There's the externalized, violent form of homophobia and then there's the internalized form. And so, I wanted to play with something like that in the genre space."

While *Leviticus* is undeniably a horror film, beyond the fear it explores is the love story between Naim and Ryan. That romanticism was something Chiarella wanted to preserve as much as the scares.

"First and foremost, I hope people enjoy the love story of it," he says. "I think there's something very universal about stories about two people connecting and finding that connection and realizing the strength of that. Whether they stay together or not, I think we all grow from those sorts of relationships. So, I hope that people are able to appreciate the story of Naim and Ryan and the bond that they form."

REISSUED & REANIMATED

BY MICHAEL GINGOLD



SOMETHING WEIR THIS WAY COMES

I wrote in my last column about a childhood spent enjoying made-for-TV horror movies, and one of the joys of that analog era was discovering some strange oddity that I'd previously known nothing about. That's what happened two nights before Halloween 1980, when I skipped *Bugs Bunny's Howl-oween Special* to watch a peculiar little film called *The Plumber* on my local PBS station.

Made for Australian television and first airing there in 1979, the film was a 76-minute combination of psychological suspense and mordant humour set in the apartment of an upper-class couple played by Judy Morris and Robert Coleby. One day, a shaggy plumber named Max (Ivar Kants) turns up at their door, insisting their bathroom needs repairs. He then proceeds to essentially move into the place, dismantling their lavatory as well as their lives.

I didn't quite get all the social commentary embedded in the narrative at the time, but I definitely appreciated the off-kilter mood and tension, punctuated by moments that were both funny-peculiar and ha-ha-funny. It was my introduction to the cinema of writer/director Peter Weir, whose name I had read about but whose other movies I had yet to experience. Later, it would be evident that *The Plumber*, with its theme of the fine line between "civilization" and tribal behaviour and communities (emphasized by the Indigenous artifacts in the apartment and music on the soundtrack) was of a piece with Weir's other films, from *The Last Wave* to his subsequent *Witness*.

Once Weir's star rose internationally with the release of his acclaimed war drama *Gallipoli*, *The Plumber* played a two-week run at Manhattan's late, lamented Bleecker Street Cinema in December 1981, where it received some critical notice. That fame also drew attention to his 1974 debut feature *The Cars That Ate Paris*, set not in France but in the titular outback town with a very unusual auto culture. The locals stage accidents involving outsiders driving through; any survivors wind up in the local hospital, lobotomized and used for experimentation. Their vehicles, meanwhile, are retrofitted as weapons with spikes and other deadly and destructive implements.

Prefiguring other '70s auto-mayhem opuses such as *Death Race 2000* and fellow Aussie George Miller's *Mad Max*, *The Cars That Ate Paris* (which Stanley Kubrick once called one of his favourite films) has a different milieu and veneer from *The Plumber*, but also sports an eccentric mix of thriller and darkly humorous tones. That made it a marketing challenge at home, while in the U.S. it was picked up by New Line Cinema, which was then a rising cult-film distributor that had handled John Waters and Sonny Chiba flicks. They released it stateside with the blunter but misleading moniker *The Cars That Eat People* beginning in November 1976, with some re-edits and voice-over narration added.

The Cars That Eat People was one of those titles that definitely piqued my interest when it appeared in the newspapers but that I was too young to see at the time. Home video would eventually give Weir (and genre) fans the chance to experience both the original *Cars That Ate Paris* version and *The Plumber*, and now the two are getting a spiffed-up showcase by the British Film Institute. Set for release May 25, the BFI's two-disc set features the UHD premiere of *Cars* in a 4K restoration that has played festivals and other specialized bookings over the last couple of years. *The Plumber*, remastered in 2K, is included on Blu-ray. (Special features had yet to be confirmed at press time.) Together, they offer the opportunity to plumb the genre roots of one of cinema history's great directors, polished to a shine.

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IT CAME FROM BOWEN'S BASEMENT

DRIVE-INS, DELETE BINS AND OTHER SINS

Bred in the Bone

by John W. Bowen

Sometimes, Wretched Reader, they hide in plain sight… well, almost. *Hangover Square* (1945), for instance, is hardly anyone's idea of an obscurity but it seems to have trudged along in the shade of its more famous peers, mentioned perpetually in also-ran terms, praised in generalities without fully getting its due for its unique charms. It's a shadowy, fogbound delight frequently categorized as noir – and I'd be hard-pressed to disagree – but it's also a psychological thriller/period piece with a wonderfully doomed performance from a largely forgotten actor who fell off the earth way too young, not to mention an absolutely killer music score by cinema's greatest composer, albeit a largely forgotten one from his earliest days.

Hangover Square was the latter of two exceedingly dark thrillers Laird Cregar starred in back-to-back with expat German director John Brahm and co-star George Sanders before dying suddenly prior to its release. He played the titular character in *The Lodger* (1944), in which a landlady in Victorian London suspects that her new tenant may be Jack the Ripper; that film's tremendous success made reteaming the same key players for another melodrama the following year a no-brainer. In *Hangover Square*, Cregar plays mild-mannered early 20th-century English composer George Harvey Bone, whose current project – an ambitious concerto for piano and orchestra – keeps getting derailed by his strange blackout spells, triggered by stress and discordant noises, during which he suspects he may be committing violent acts, including several unsolved murders. He's concerned enough to risk incriminating himself by consulting a Scotland Yard doctor (Sanders) who, despite initially suspecting the worst, reluctantly crosses Bone off the suspect list for various flimsy reasons. Bone's romantic pursuits only promise to complicate matters; when we first meet him, he's enamoured of his musical benefactor's wholesome, virtuous daughter Barbara (Faye Marlowe) but soon finds himself fatally distracted by bad-girl night club singer Netta (standby noir sex grenade Linda Darnell), who double-crosses Bone both romantically and professionally to advance her stalled career. Will her uppance come? I'll never tell, although she's just one of a handful of characters blissfully unaware that they're pissing off a very resourceful homicidal maniac.

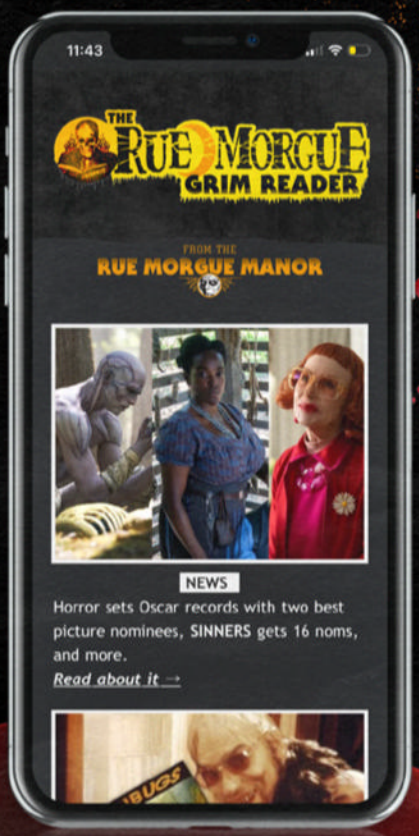
Now, regarding the aforementioned soundtrack: coming several years after he scored *Citizen Kane* and more than a decade before his best-known work for Alfred Hitchcock, Bernard Herrmann's incredible music for *Hangover Square* is far from his best-known work, which is a freakin' crime. We don't get to hear more than a few minutes of Bone's (i.e. Herrmann's) piano concerto in the film and I'd kill, or at the very least maim, to hear a full restoration of this piece, which channels Sergei Prokofiev's darker moments (especially his Piano Concerto No. 2) vividly and authentically.

Then there's Cregar himself, a figure as tragic as his career was unconventional. His was an imposing yet odd screen presence, a hulking bulk offset by big, soulful eyes and a soft, almost effeminate voice. Historical accounts generally depict him as yet another gay actor whose lifestyle was guarded and often embellished as straight by studio execs and publicists. This naturally included "leaking" stories to the press that linked him romantically with various women, although some accounts depict him as less secretive about his own sexuality than many of his closeted contemporaries. What couldn't be disputed was his physique – 6'3" and upwards of 300 pounds – that made him a natural to play villains and henchmen but stifled his burning ambition to be a romantic lead. Unwilling to accept anything less, Cregar subjected himself to various controversial medical procedures (including surgeries) to induce rapid weight loss. He had shed close to a hundred pounds in less than a year prior to principal photography on *Hangover Square*, dying of a heart attack shortly afterward, barely 30 years old.

Hangover Square has enjoyed several good-looking digital reissues, but if you'd rather cheap out, it's easy to come by on that streaming device I won't name that rhymes with blue pubes. So, get the hell out of Bowen's Basement and go spend some time in Bone's.

WHERE HORROR LIVES BETWEEN ISSUES

THE RUE MORGUE GRIM READER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THE RUE MORGUE GRIM READER
FROM THE
RUE MORGUE MANOR
NEWS
Horror sets Oscar records with two best picture nominees, SINNERS gets 16 noms, and more.
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I SPEND A STUPID AMOUNT OF TIME THINKING ABOUT MY TEETH, BUT I WAS A SNAGGLE-toothed, fangy kid. My canines came in sharp and pointy, and people sure loved to point it out – sometimes with delight, sometimes with the casual cruelty of bratty playground observation. I got braces. I got them off. I promptly never wore my retainer.

Invisalign was nearly five thousand dollars out of pocket to correct what I'd undone through my own negligence and the obstinate migration of my teeth, those almost admirably tenacious fuckers. Now I wear my retainer religiously, a ritual of control, a ward against chaos. And still, they shift and drift and rove. Slowly, inexorably, my teeth are creeping back scraggy and skimble-skamble. No, I don't often smile for photos.

Other people dream about their teeth falling out – that universal nightmare of loss and vulnerability. I dream about my teeth looking like chipped and crooked gravestones in an abandoned cemetery, monuments to failure. It's not decay I fear (not to brag, but I've never had a cavity in my life). It's watching my body betray the bargain, shift without permission, and undo what I tried so hard to fix.

Teeth occupy a uniquely horrifying space in our bodies and our imaginations. They're essentially bones that pierce through flesh, tools for tearing and grinding that we use dozens of times a day without thought. They're also deeply personal. We spend fortunes trying to perfect them, whiten them, straighten them. And yet they remain fundamentally uncontrollable, doing whatever they want, whenever they want. You're not the boss of them.

Horror gets this. Teeth appear again and again as motifs of transformation, violation, and power. The gradual loss of Brundlefly's teeth in *The Fly* marks his deterioration into something inhuman and extremely gross. The vagina dentata of *Teeth* makes castration anxiety literal and bitey. Kevin Bacon pulls a rotted tooth from his own mouth in *Stir of Echoes*, complete with a string of blood and spit that feels like you could reach out and grab it. Justin Long's character in *Tusk* gets nonconsensually outfitted with tusks made from the bones that used to be his legs. Your own leg bones are now teeth in your mouth? That's fucked up.

Vampire fangs have been marking the line between human and monster across decades, from Nosferatu's rat-like protrusions to the sensual chompers of *Interview with the Vampire*, from *The Lost Boys*' punk rock aesthetic to *Twilight*'s sparkly li'l vamps. Del Toro's *Hellboy II* took a different approach: tooth fairies that swarm in hideous multi-legged packs, ravenous for calcium, eating your teeth and stripping victims to the bone.

Teeth are weapons. The xenomorph's telescoping second mouth with its gleaming teeth. The great white shark in *Jaws*, all tooth and hunger. "What big teeth you have, grandmother," observes

Little Red Riding Hood, right before the wolfish reveal. Teeth announce: the rules just changed and, baby, you're on the menu.

Even the act of *looking* at teeth feels transgressive. Open someone's mouth, and you're confronting intimacy and revulsion in equal measure: the glistening, wet pink cave, the bones barely concealed by gums (cue Titus Andromedon: "Your teeth are bones that live outside, that hang from your lips like bats. Oh! Outside bones!"), the constant threat of decay lurking between molars. No wonder dentistry is horror movie gold: Laurence Olivier's sadistic "Is it safe?" in *Marathon Man*, the musical torture of *Little Shop of Horrors*' gleeful dentist, the whole subgenre of dental anxiety that treats routine procedures as torture sequences.

Our obsession with teeth goes way back. Tooth filing has appeared in various cultures as a rite of passage or aesthetic choice. Medieval Japanese court culture practiced *ohaguro*, blackening teeth with dye. Victorian mourning jewellery incorporated pulled teeth as relics of the dead – wearing Grandmother's molar in a locket alongside a curl of her hair. Hip-hop culture transformed gold grills from flash into art form, making teeth into a canvas for display and status. Goth clubs have sold fang caps for decades, letting people cosplay vampirism for an evening.

When I first heard about permanent fangs, something clicked. Here I am, fighting my teeth's slow, janky drift and trying to minimize the feral pointies I was born with, meanwhile, in say, Los Angeles, people are paying to get what places such as Viper Veneers offer: permanent fang veneers inspired by the toothy undead baddies in *Lost Boys*, *Blade*, *Queen of the Damned*, and *Underworld*. Bonded to your teeth. Part of your face now, not a costume you take off when the party's over. As they put it: "Character customization shouldn't be exclusive to a video game." Hell yeah! It's body modification with a clear aesthetic lineage. They stress proper care, and mention that at least six people have broken their fangs eating Wingstop. (Cursed wings! I cackled when I read that, am I horrible?) But just like my Invisalign-straightened teeth, longevity depends on maintenance.

So, lean into my fangs? Go even fangier? I don't know. Teeth, man. They betray us, mock us and haunt us, and refuse to cooperate no matter how much money we spend. And wow, do they also outlast us. Teeth are memento mori – what archaeologists dig up centuries later, what identifies bodies when everything else is gone. They're how they'd I.D. me if someone beat my face in and filed off my fingerprints and set me on fire. (What, you don't think about this stuff?) I guess it's good that mine are distinctive, then? Anyway, I'll be thinking of this next time someone tells me to smile.

IN THIS ISSUE

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Dynamite

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CURSE OF DARK SHADOWS
Craig Hurd-McKenney and Jok
Hermes Press

CRUEL UNIVERSE V2 #7
Various
EC/ONI

BLOOD IN FOUR COLOURS

BY PEDRO CABEZUELO

In 2023's *Bixby Grant, Private Eye: Wolf She Cried!* we met Bixby – "Bix" to his friends – a hard-boiled private eye who had unwittingly unleashed the Pharaoh's Curse back in 1931 and has spent the last 90 years as an immortal mummy. That adventure saw Bix tangle with a family of werewolves, one of many supernatural denizens living in Harbor City.

Originally, creator and writer Patrick Coyle simply wanted to devise a character he could blow up and then put back together: hence, a mummy. However, as the idea began to grow, so did Bix's world.

"Bix was going to be the only supernatural element in his world and be more of a pulp-hero-style character like The Shadow," says Coyle. "As I played with the concept, it became obvious that it would be more fun if he investigated cases that were mystical in nature, so it made sense to have this world populated with other monsters and ghouls."

The follow-up six-part series, *Fangs & Brimstone* (issue four out now), takes full advantage of this world-building, teaming the private eye with Diego, a rockabilly vampire, as they match wits with ghosts, witches, and assorted monsters to stop a series of ritual killings that may unleash a literal hell on earth. Even worse for Bix, the case may be directly connected with the events that turned him into a mummy and revealed his brother as the head of a satanic cult.

It's obvious from the narrative and art style – not to mention Bix's dialogue – that Bixby Grant is heavily influenced by the noir genre. With its femme fatales, shadowy characters, and murder most foul, it's a genre that lends itself particularly well to more overt horror elements.

"Both [horror and noir] tend to be about unveiling a dark secret, one that reveals either the horrific side of human nature or a literal monster that reflects our worst fears," says Coyle. "There's a foreboding to both genres, too, sometimes realized through a tense or scary scene, and sometimes more existential or tonal. I love playing up the conventions of noir crime like red herrings, secret societies, and corrupt politicians, and infusing them with horror elements. It's a load of fun."

Bixby Grant, Private Eye: Fangs & Brimstone: *Issue #4 sees the mummy detective team up with a rockabilly vampire to solve an occult case of ritual killings.*

Any doubt that Coyle is enjoying his visit to Harbor City is quickly dispelled by the amount of humour to be found among the dark streets. Much of this comes at the expense of Bix playing exasperated straight man to Diego's enthusiasm and inability to follow instructions – and the occasional appendage being torn off. It makes an effective contrast to Bix's inner turmoil and past demons, another noir element effortlessly incorporated into the narrative. Bix is haunted by memories of lost love as well as his coming to terms with his brother's duplicity. It's a lot of baggage to deal with, something that doesn't come easy for a Depression-era boy.

"Generally speaking, those people did *not* talk about feelings to an unhealthy degree," says Coyle. "*Fangs & Brimstone*, at its core, is a simple story about a man who doesn't know how to deal with emotions, particularly complicated ones. Bix's struggle is one the entire world shares. Most of us don't seem comfortable talking about our worries or personal problems. I've learned over my life that it's okay to have feelings and talk about them – especially the uncomfortable ones. A little talk therapy would go a long way to making this world a little less crazy. And if an old-school tough guy like Bix could do it, I feel like anyone could."

FOLLOW PEDRO ON X @PCABEZUELO

QUICK CUTS

Tired of the bureaucracy and lack of advancement in Hell, fallen angel-cum-low level demon Bifrons decides it's time to save some souls, instead of tormenting them. Along with his chipper assistant (Pa)Zuzu, he opens a life coach agency on Earth. Their first client: sixteen-year-old Wendy, whose wealthy parents have been using her as a means of keeping their older daughter alive through blood and stem cell transfusions, as well as organ transplants. Can Wendy finally find happiness at the hands of demons seeking redemption? Essentially a black comedy, *Touched by a Demon* is genuinely funny, and indeed its first pages belie just how dark the story will soon become. Once we hear about Wendy's past, things turn twisted very quickly, rushing to a shocking cliffhanger that is both sombre and laugh-out-loud hilarious.

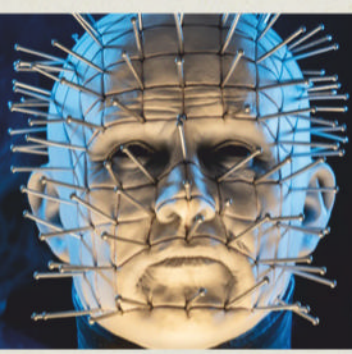
Reggie Mantle is throwing a big party at his parents' lakehouse. Of course, when Archie Andrews is one of your guests, anything can happen. In this case, Archie stumbles across a certain book called the *Necronomicon* and faster than you can say "Klaatu, Barada…," the Deadites are unleashed on the hapless teens. Luckily for Archie, he recently got a job at the local S-Mart and met a certain gentleman who may be able to help: Ashley J. Williams. While many of the Archie horror titles are played straight, *Archie x The Army of Darkness* takes its comedy cues from both classic *Archie*s and the *Evil Dead* series. It helps that Bill Galvan's art hearkens back to the classic *Archie* style, adding an extra layer of comedy to the over-the-top gore, making for a fun and sometimes gruesome read that should please fans of both franchises.

Many Lovecraft adaptations focus on the more visceral and visual aspects of their respective tale, cherry-picking elements from the original story and discarding the rest in favour of a new framework that suits their focus. Manga artist Gou Tanabe's *The Shadow Out of Time* tries to remain as faithful as possible to Lovecraft, even if this results in a slow-paced, highly metaphysical tale of an early 20th-century professor who inexplicably swaps minds with an alien being residing on the Earth 200 million years ago. Tanabe pays honour to both Lovecraft's spirit and words, spending a large part of the narrative on the after-effects of Professor Peaslee's experience, as he tries to piece together his shattered memories of the years spent inhabiting an alien's body. Tanabe's rendition of the aliens and their environment is stunning, with vast, bleak landscapes oozing with dread. If there's a criticism, it's the inability of the manga's paperback size to do full justice to these foreboding vistas crying out to be viewed in a larger format.

Carolyn Stoddard-Hawkes and her cousin David Collins have spent the last 50 years trying to exorcise their ancestral home, Collinwood, from the *Curse of Dark Shadows*. In addition to purging the presence of ghosts, witches, and Leviathans, the duo plans to rescue David's one-time governess, Victoria Winters, from going over the edge of Widow Hills' back in 1797. To do this, they need to elicit the services of vampire Barnabas Collins – but can he be trusted? If little of the preceding made sense to you, chances are your familiarity with the classic 1960s horror soap *Dark Shadows* is minimal and as a result this new graphic novel may prove nonsensical. While some attempt at orientating newcomers is made, primarily through the introduction of new characters, the book drills deep into the show's mythology, making references that will undoubtedly surprise even the most ardent fan. For those fans, however, there is much delight within these pages, both in terms of plot development and characterization. Craig Hurd-McKenney goes back to the show's soap opera roots, with plenty of dramatic conflict, and he also establishes several subplots which hopefully will be developed in future books.

While I love horror anthologies, I'm the first to admit that many short tales disappear from my thoughts once I put the book down. But every once in a while, I'll find something that burrows under my skin like *Cruel Universe V2* #7. While the opening two tales are strong, it is the third, "Artificial Insanity," by Amy Roy and Malachi Ward, that had the most impact. Immersing himself in stories at a young age, Billy Thomas grew up a bit of an outsider, dreamer, and somewhat of a social loser. Wanting to leave his mark on the world, he creates ALFRED, a robot that becomes an A.I. writing/singing/filmmaking phenomenon. As ALFRED begins to dominate pop culture, Billy starts to have doubts about what he's unleashed. Rather than painting an apocalyptic vision of A.I. gone awry, the story points the finger squarely at the masses, exposing their eager complicity in the loss of cultural creativity, experimentation, and quality. In an ingenious meta-moment, Ward's art begins to degrade as the story progresses, losing more and more detail until what's left is a pale imitation. An apt metaphor to underscore a chilling cautionary tale.

We have such sights to show you…



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THE NINTH CIRCLE BOOKS

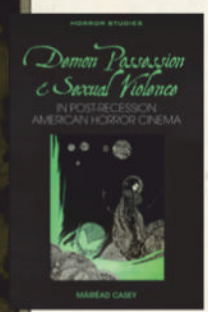
DEMON POSSESSION AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN POST-GREAT RECESSION AMERICAN HORROR CINEMA

Máiréad Casey

University of Wales Press

Dating back to the release of *The Exorcist*, demon possession films have shocked audiences with their depiction of religious horror and people's spiritual and physical violation, and they continue to shock today. It could be argued that these films are especially striking in the modern lens following the #MeToo movement, and in Máiréad Casey's analysis in *Demon Possession and Sexual Violence in Post-Great Recession American Horror Cinema*, the concept of demon possession is stripped down and shown for what it really is – a meditation on sexual violence.

The book covers several different cinematic takes on demon possession. From depictions of "popular misogyny" in films such as *Darling* (2015) and *The Possession* (2012), to examinations of misconduct within female-dominated creative labour professions in *The Neon Demon* (2016), *Starry Eyes* (2014), and *Suspiria* (2018), Casey picks apart the trope with a fine-toothed comb and explores the popular horror subgenre in the context of the modern feminist movement.



Notably, Casey's study is limited to American films post-2010s, but while the scope is limited, it's ultra-focused and well-researched. The reader is never left bored, despite the academic tone of the book, as it presents an enriching perspective on the horror genre and feels like a well-deserved sigh of relief after witnessing the anti-feminist tone that many films in this subgenre take.

Ultimately, it's a good thing to dissect the films we watch in this way, to help make sense of what we are witnessing onscreen. To properly appreciate a film, we have to look at it through a critical eye and understand what the film means in the context of the world around us. Casey has done this succinctly in this book, and it's bound to be studied in university settings for semesters to come.

RACHEL MEGHAN

URBAN LEGENDS AND THE CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY OF HORROR

Irena Jurković, Marko Lukić and Tijana Parezanović, eds.

University of Wales Press

Urban Legends and the Cultural Geography of Horror is a collection of academic essays which sets out to steer future conversations toward including the examination of space and location into already popular studies of horror media and urban legends. Though each essay stands strong on its own research, it is debatable whether there is enough cohesion around the premise to make the editors' argument for them.

Generally organized across three subsections (haunted space, spread out spaces, and digital spaces), the essays cover quite a lot of ground (pun intended) when it comes to the diversity of horror media. Board games, creepypasta, video games, and television are all used by one author or another as a basis for utilizing location to discuss their theses.

An investigation of the creation of the lore of the Richmond [Virginia] Vampire by Aíne Norris provides an interesting look at a hyper-local urban legend, though the lack of any horror media as examples makes it a puzzling first essay in this book. Her detailed primary sources for assembling and tracking the real man behind the legend, however, are commendable.

Fernando Gabriel Pagnoni Berns and Canela Ailen Rodriguez Fontao's look at the cinema of Argentinian director Demián Rugna (*Terrified*, *When Evil Lurks*) satisfies more of the collection's overarching premise and is an excellent, thorough examination of the rural and urban settings within the context of Argentina's cultural history and traditions.

Similarly, Victoria Santamaría Ibor's investigation of *Deadstream*'s melding of the workspace with a haunted space feels like a fresh way to approach the conceit of spaces and horror. Her employment of both the abject and found-footage cinema theories is a smart way to further dissect the unserious film.

While some essays fit more tidily into this volume's proposed theme than others, each entry is well-researched and theoretically sound in its own right. The inclusion of recent media and contemporary filmmakers and creators help make the studies within *Urban Legends and the Cultural Geography of Horror* feel fresh, relevant, and exciting.

DEIRDRE CRIMMINS

STRANGE BUILDINGS

Uketsu

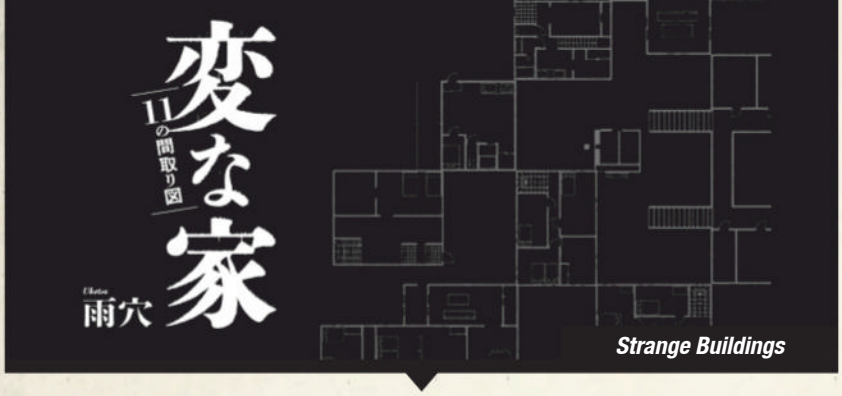
HarperVia

"You couldn't truly understand the secrets of a house without understanding the people living there first."

This prophetic piece of dialogue is an apropos introduction to Uketsu's latest installment of his horror mystery series. Following *Strange Pictures* and *Strange Houses*, this new book expands on the Japanese author's unique multimedia presentation by using realistic floor plans to create an engaging mystery for readers to try to solve before they reach the final chapter.

Strange Buildings picks up immediately after the publication of Uketsu's previous novel. Employing an exceptional use of meta-fiction, the unnamed author receives numerous inquiries from folks around Japan who read his book. They ask him to investigate the floor plans of their own homes to help solve their eerie mysteries. Eleven new buildings are presented to him along with exclusive interviews that contain verbal clues, red herrings, and inescapable paranoia and distrust. Throughout the novel, certain characters reappear in seemingly isolated chapters, including a conman running a construction company, a human goddess who's missing a couple limbs, and a handful of interviewees born out of broken homes (both metaphorically and literally). An overarching mystery slowly materializes, connecting the eleven cases, before bringing the book to a satisfying, albeit disturbing, conclusion.

What makes *Strange Buildings* stronger than Uketsu's previous books is the ability to solve the puzzle bit-by-bit through revisiting chapters as you move along with the narrative. While the finale still does some stretching to connect the last dots, it honours that essential mystery trope of allowing the reader an opportunity to solve the puzzle before all is ultimately revealed.



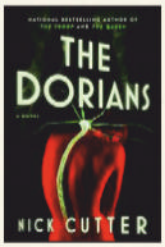
Strange Buildings

Unless you're an architect or a D.I.Y. dad addicted to watching home improvement videos on YouTube, you'll never have more fun reading floor plans.

A.G. SORETTE

THE DORIANS

Nick Cutter
Gallery Books



Humans have longed for immortality for, well, probably as long as there have been humans. The idea of putting death on ice is attractive (and helps explain the eternal appeal of vampires), but when tackled in fiction, the results of such experimentation tend to be as fraught as they'd be in real life.

So, from the moment Nick Cutter reveals the nature of the life-extending experiment at the heart of his latest novel, *The Dorians*, we know we're on a collision course with something awful. If additional red flags are required, they can be found in the paperwork signed by the elderly test subjects and in the unstable, possibly sociopathic teenage prodigy heading up the whole thing. The gist of the fictional science at play here sees a genetically modified organism implanted within human hosts in order to cure their ailments, reverse aging, and potentially allow them to live in a perpetual state of youth... if it works.

For a while, the test subjects experience the improved health, libidos, and physiques of much younger folks, but while the organism is supposed to be unthinking, all living things, even the simplest ones, come equipped with certain implicit biological imperatives.

Much of the novel is a slow-burn, as more and more evidence builds up that the experiment is running away from both its team and the participants, but once the floodgates finally open there's plenty of violence and body horror as the organism commandeers its hosts from the inside out.

In his acknowledgements, Cutter details how the idea came to him during his father's cancer treatment as he himself approached 50 and, all that mad, mad science aside, the book is at its core a meditation on mortality and aging. Of course, if anything's truly horrifying, it's all the ways our bodies will betray us as we grow old, but *The Dorians* reminds us that a scientifically engineered road back to our misspent youth could be so, so much worse.

MONICA S. KUEBLER

HEADLIGHTS

CJ Leede
Tor Nightfire

CJ Leede is well regarded in the literary horror space for her extreme stories and unhinged

THIS'LL MAKE THINGS A LITTLE EASIER

Attila Veres
Valancourt Books

Attila Veres' first collection in English, *The Black Maybe* (*RM*'s Best Single-Author Collection of 2022), deserved all the praise it got. His second one confirms this author's status in the field and raises the stakes. It's clear now that we are in the presence of a genius!

The book contains six tales, four of them novelette length, all of them impeccably translated from Hungarian by the author and most should be serious contenders for awards this year. They offer layered, heartfelt probings into alienated, damaged, deluded, exploited individuals whose plights are suddenly and randomly plunged into veritable hells. Those are, to make matters worse, usually tinged with absurdity bordering on very sick black humour.

A writer's vanity is dissected when his story is translated into a dead language which restructures reality in "a pit full of teeth" (sic!). A girl's superpower is abused by the monstrously totalitarian government in "Transistor." The soul-crushing corporate hell on earth literally sides with the alien gods in the satire of Ligottian proportions, "The Designated Contact Individual." A random rape in a FRP game evokes apocalypse in "Damage d10+7." "The Summer I Chose to Die" is also the summer when Lovecraftian fish people choose to invade Earth's beaches – told from the perspective of disaffected drug fiends. In the titular tale, the satire is most pronounced and most biting: a special tree feeds on your pain but awards you with money. Will it, however, *Make Things a Little Easier*? Spoiler: no, it will make them worse.

Who said that horror is an escapist genre? Veres confronts you head-on with where we are right now, and how, and why. You will laugh, cry, shiver, and beg for mercy. No mercy will be bestowed. This is first-rate horror!

DEJAN OGNJANOVIĆ

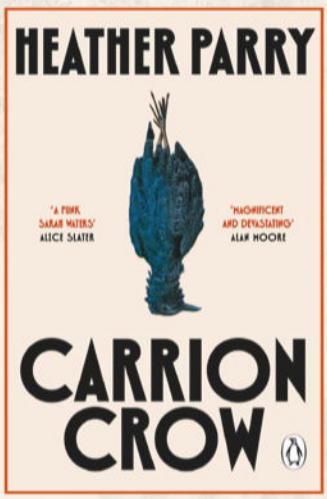
IN *CARRION CROW*, HEATHER PARRY EXPLORES TOXIC MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIPS AND ALL THE WAYS SOCIETY CONSPIRES TO TRAP WOMEN

RAISED FOR RUIN

BY MONICA S. KUEBLER

WHEN READERS MEET MARGUERITE IN HEATHER PARRY'S *CARRION CROW*, SHE'S ALREADY BEEN ENSCONCED IN THE SMALL, DILAPIDATED ATTIC OF HER FAMILY HOME FOR AN UNKNOWN LENGTH OF time. To train her up for her impending marriage, her mother Cécile has provided Marguerite with a bed, sewing table and machine, a bookshelf stocked with appropriate reading material, and increasingly infrequent meal delivery.

"I wanted us to meet Marguerite not at the start of her life, but in the midst of her fate, and I wanted the family's story and secrets to reveal themselves slowly, and not in logical order," says Parry of her disturbing gothic novel, which trades not just in familial trauma and cruelty, but also unlikely transformation. "I really love books that don't give up all their answers easily, and I love to leave space for the reader to form their own opinions of the characters."



Just as much a character in Parry's Victorian-era story is the very real, incredibly popular 1861 book *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management*, which remains in print to this day. While the volume lived on her mother's cookbook shelf her entire childhood, the Scotland-based author did not delve into it until she was in her early thirties. Its influence on *Carrion Crow* (out in paperback June 30 from Pushkin Press) can't be overstated.

"It's such an interesting document," she says. "Its so of its time (especially with regards to the recipes), so full of strange found poetry in its descriptions, and yet it has a whole section at the end on legal memoranda and childrearing: it's in this section that I found the phrase 'baby vampire,' referring to Mrs. Beeton's belief that a mother needs rest and respite from constant giving, constant breastfeeding, and lack of sleep. This seemed such modern phrasing (and such modern advice) that I fell down a rabbit hole trying to understand who this woman was."

Turns out Isabella Beeton was not at all who *Household Management* implied (i.e. a successful fiftysomething homemaker), rather she was a 21-year-old who took much of the advice that appeared in the book from other older volumes. While Beeton died by age 28, her book would live on as a "symbol of 'properness' in the Victorian period."

In *Carrion Crow*, Beeton's book provides not just the chapter titles but seeps into other facets of the narrative as Marguerite believes that she will be deemed ready to marry once she's committed all Beeton's vast knowledge to memory.

"I wanted the book to be symbolic within my novel, and I wanted the voice of Isabella to be there somehow, but I did not want her as a character," Parry explains, "so the book itself became a character, an influence on both Marguerite and her mother, and a lens through which to view the hidden parts of Victorian wealth-building: the effects of empire, the labour of the lower classes, the commodification of women and children. The other two huge influences on this book's plot were the story of Blanche Monnier, the 'Séquestrée de Poitiers' kept prisoner in the attic of her home by her family, and a series of extremely troubled mother-daughter relationships I've seen unfold in real life."

Readers realize long before Marguerite that her mother's intentions may not be honourable. But by then, *Carrion Crow*'s already careening towards an inevitable, devastating outcome as the extended isolation and malnourishment take a gruesome toll on Marquerite's body and mind in shockingly unforgettable ways. (At one point, a long-imprisoned Marguerite, whose sole companion is the crow nesting in the deteriorating rafters above, sews herself a pillow child and affixes it to her stomach with needle and thread.)

"One of the things I am most interested in is the concept of self-deception, which is something I have come to through philosophy," says Parry. "Very often we deceive ourselves because of the love we feel towards someone: we don't want to believe that they are capable of poor treatment, or selfish behaviour, or that they have changed from the people we originally knew them to be. Very often we realise the facts of the matter too late to save ourselves. I think this is not only what happens to Marguerite, but what happens to Cécile as well."

main characters. Her first novel, *Maeve Fly*, was a hit amongst lovers of weird and unapologetic female protagonists, and her follow-up *American Rapture* offered a stark apocalyptic portrayal of religious trauma. Her newest book, *Headlights*, is less extreme horror but still heavy on the trauma, and it illustrates Leede's maturity as a writer.

Headlights follows Special Agent Daniel Stansfield as he's called back to his home state of Colorado to solve a cold case that he abandoned years ago. Innocent people have been waking up from blackouts wearing the skin of their supposed victims, and no one can figure out what is going on. Aside from the gruesome case, Daniel's been through severe trauma, having lost two sets of parents in his youth, and suffering from PTSD from his time in the military. He also has a gift, not unlike that of his namesake in Stephen King's novel *The Shining* (which is heavily referenced throughout), leading him down a dark road where he is forced to confront his own demons.

While the book has a very cinematic vibe, the actual horror of the story is disorienting and dissociative. Readers expecting the balls-to-the-wall horror of Leede's debut novel might be surprised that this is a more slow-paced journey, akin to the dramatic human-based horror of Nat Cassidy. This is a story rife with trauma exploration and human, rather than monstrous, pain. The novel sets out to be a cult tale, a supernatural fable, and a Stephen King homage, and it manages to blend them together in a way that makes you feel like you're in the middle of the action or watching an Osgood Perkins movie.

Where Leede's strength lies, and where it has been throughout her career, is in telling stories about trauma through the lens of extreme horror. This time, the horror takes on a whole new form.

RACHEL MEGHAN

THE DOMAIN OF THE PALE QUEEN

Benjamin Tweddell

Nepenthe Press

If your idea of occult horror is a bunch of guys in robes standing around a pentagram, invoking demons, prepare to have your mind blown by how much more it can be. Leave it to Benjamin Tweddell, an English writer and musician, to initiate you into traditions deeper than their pulpy, genre fiction reinterpretations. His three stories and the titular novella deal with folk horror, the occult, the fantastic, religious horror, and the holy as manifested in the English countryside in the decades after WWI.

Damien Murphy's knowledgeable introduction says that "Encounters with primal archetypes, where they don't end in catastrophe, can lead to enormous transformation." Or as Nietzsche would have it: "That which does not kill you can make you stronger." The contents of this collection hint at (or depict) catastrophes, but they put equal emphasis on the potential for transformation hidden in the occult.

"To Speak in Golden Tongues" takes place during WWII, when the mystical unity of rural communities is awakened by a special church bell. In "The Game of the Great God Pan" a man, burdened by the guilt for his son's death in WWI, encounters Pan worship as an alternative. "The House of the Moon" evokes maternal and lunar magic in a man attracted by a female water spirit. "The Domain of the Pale Queen" depicts the gradual investigation of an ancient shrine to a pagan deity guarded by the weird hunters and their hounds; those who escape them can be awarded with the privilege of ending up impaled, Dracula-style, to honour the Pale Queen.

Encounters with vital forces, as portrayed in this finely produced and illustrated book, can be destructive or transformative: you decide which, depending on what you bring to the magic table. Be warned.

DEJAN OGNJANOVIĆ

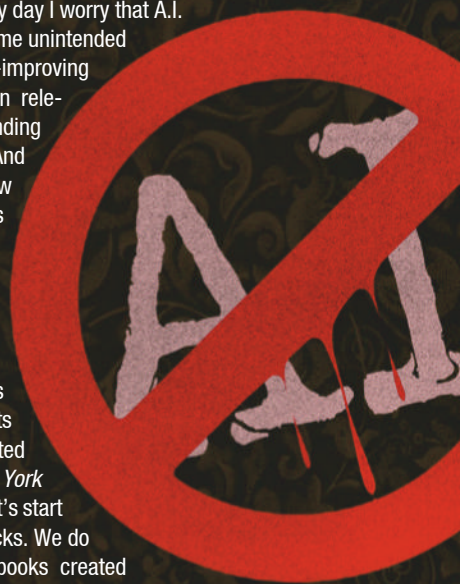
LIBRARY OF THE DAMNED

THE HORROR OF A.I.

I'm an '80s kid. I grew up during the dawn of home computing, when these miracle desktop machines promised to improve our lives in ways we couldn't yet imagine. I was in high school when the internet hit and let me tell you that the starry-eyed belief that this insanely cool new technology would change our lives and the whole world for the better was a real thing.

Well, I just turned 50 and, with the clarity of hindsight, I'd like to tell idealistic young me that you must never underestimate humankind's ability through greed, malice, or just general incompetence to fuck shit up. As Taylor Swift once sang, "This is why we can't have nice things." (If you'd like to dive further into our techno-dystopian world, consider reading Cory Doctorow's *Enshittification*; it's not the kind of horror we cover here but abjectly horrifying none the less.)

For the last couple years, the arrival of generative A.I. has been making the job of editor increasingly difficult – not only is this technology intent on stealing our livelihoods, it's harder to vet new writers, and worse yet, it's increasingly trying to creep into the art we cover. Its resemblance to an amorphous, inexhaustible horror movie monster is not lost on me. Every day I worry that A.I. will infiltrate the mag in some unintended way, because A.I. is ever-improving and we editors have been relegated to playing an unending game of whack-a-mole. And if there's one thing I know about whack-a-mole, it's that inevitably, at some point, you're going to miss.



Last issue, we missed, when we featured Mia Ballard's *Shy Girl*, which has since been cancelled by its publisher due to "suspected A.I. use" (as per *The New York Times*). What can I say? Let's start with I'm sorry, and this sucks. We do not, on principle, cover books created with generative A.I. When it's been suspected, we've replaced the review. That said, if a book's coming out from a publisher – especially a larger one – there's an expected level of vetting (and transparency). That clearly wasn't there. And it got by us too. The worst part? As much as I want to, I can't even guarantee it won't happen again, because A.I.'s seemingly here to stay and the ceaseless whack-a-mole continues.

That said, if you'd like to read some inspiring indie releases that made the leap to traditional publishing, may I recommend David Wellington's *Monster Island* (which had its roots as an online serial) and Alys Arden's YA novel *The Casquette Girls* (which started its sharp upward trajectory as a Wattpad novel)? Both are sound examples of their creators using technology for good.

Fuck A.I.

MONICA S. KUEBLER

Follow Monica on Substack at libraryofthedamned.substack.com

THE FRIGHT GALLERY

CURATED BY PAIGE REYNOLDS

230

THIS MONTH:

THE VINTAGE VISIONS OF ESTHER LIMONES

A RUE MORGUE COLLECTIBLE

Spanish visual artist Esther Limones conjures her visions through a combination of techniques, producing gothic tableaux often set in ornate vintage frames that are ready to hang in your crypt. Her subjects are most often solitary women, figures who radiate occult power and mystique sharpened with beauty and menace. You don't simply look at Limones' work, you withstand it… if you can.

NAME

Esther Limones

HOMETOWN HAUNT

Madrid, Spain

WEAPON OF CHOICE

"My artistic practice is essentially eclectic. Although digital photo collage and painting are the backbone of my current production, I enjoy exploring the limits of matter through sculpture, ceramics, or classical techniques like cyanotype. I am open to any medium; each idea demands its own texture."

DEEDS

"As a Pisces, my nature innately tends toward distraction and daydreaming; I tend to wander in my own thoughts. Therefore, imposing a structure and daily rigour on my work is what allows me to ground those ideas and turn them into tangible art. It is a constant struggle between my emotional fluidity and the need for order."

MY NIGHTMARE FUEL

"I'm fascinated by the symbiosis between opposites: the eternal dialogue between good and evil, the sublime and the grotesque, or the calm before the storm. All of this imagery converges in the female figure: a woman who embodies this duality, appearing powerful and vulnerable at the same time."

LAST WORDS

"Where God erects a church, the Devil always raises a chapel; and if you look closely, you'll find that the second one has more worshippers."
– Daniel Defoe

RESTING PLACE

Instagram: @estherlimones.art

FOLLOW PAIGE ON INSTAGRAM @PAIGEREYNOLDSART

A DUMPSTER DIVE INTO HORROR'S ODDS & CURIOS

DEVIL'S IN THE DETAILS

BY STACIE PONDER

THE TRAILER FOR *SCREAM 7* PLAYED DURING ONE OF MY RECENT TRIPS TO THE CINEMA, and a detail jumped right out of the screen and stabbed me directly in my brain: given her rather traumatic history with the telephone, why would Sidney Prescott, of all people, answer a random phone call without so much as a pause? I don't know about you, but I have taken the titular teachings of the 1980 film *Don't Answer the Phone!* to heart, especially when it's an "Unknown Caller" on the line. Ghostface would have to leave me a voicemail that I may or may not ever listen to; in fact, there's a good chance the call would be labelled by my phone as "Likely Spam" and go directly to the digital abyss. Yeah, he'd kill me anyway eventually, but at least I wouldn't have to suffer all his taunts and gatekeepy quizzes first.

Once upon a time, though, I would have absolutely answered. You see, kids, we Gen Xers had an incontrovertible Pavlovian response to a ringing telephone. We'd answer 100 percent of the time without knowing who – or what – might be on the other end and it was an exciting way to live, delicately balanced on the razor's edge of danger and intrigue! Okay, yes, I exaggerate. But it's not overstating things to say that horror movies exploited that ever-present threat of the landline and benefitted greatly from it.

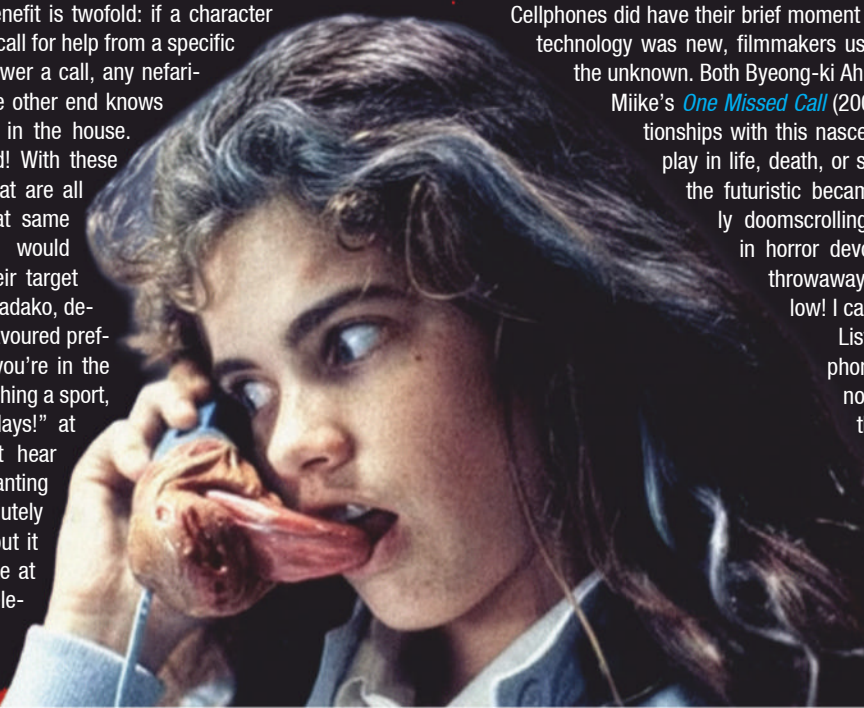
By design, a landline tethers a telephone to a single place. In horror films, the storytelling benefit is twofold: if a character is in peril, they can only call for help from a specific location, and if they answer a call, any nefarious ne'er-do-well on the other end knows exactly where they are in the house. A chilling notion, indeed! With these modern "cellphones" that are all the rage nowadays, that same nefarious ne'er-do-well would have no idea where their target is. Imagine Samara (or Sadako, depending on your *Ring*-flavoured preferences) calling whilst you're in the clerb or in an arena watching a sport, forced to yell "Seven days!" at you because you can't hear whispering over the chanting crowd. I would absolutely watch that film, mind, but it wouldn't keep me awake at night the way her OG telephone-based terror campaign did.

There are countless scenes throughout the genre that were built around the telephone that simply wouldn't hit the same way in the age of mobile. Think of the sorority girls huddled around the receiver in *Black Christmas* (1974), listening as the wacko Billy calls them all "pretty piggy you-know-whats." Or the later sequence, when a man runs through a gauntlet of loud and imposing machinery, trying to trace one of Billy's calls (the technological complexity of which still boggles to this day). Sure, had cellphones existed in 1978, Michael Myers could have bonked Lynda on the head with one, but that wouldn't have been as visceral as strangling her to death with the curly cord. And don't get me started on Nancy Thompson's phone receiver turning into Freddy Krueger's mouth in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*! An iPhone could never.

Two films perfectly encapsulate everything that was superior about Ye Olden Phone Days: there's *Murder by Phone* (1982), whose title tells you everything you need to know, and *When a Stranger Calls* (1979), of course. The extended opening sequence of the latter, wherein babysitter Jill Johnson receives a series of phone calls asking if she's "checked the children" – only to learn the calls are coming from inside the house – is so terrifying and so iconic that everyone forgets that the rest of the film is essentially a police procedural and something of a snooze.

Cellphones did have their brief moment in horror, however. When the technology was new, filmmakers used it to tap into our fears of the unknown. Both Byeong-ki Ahn's *Phone* (2002) and Takashi Miike's *One Missed Call* (2003) explored our uneasy relationships with this nascent tech and the role it might play in life, death, or something in between. But as the futuristic became ubiquitous (and eventually doomscrollingly mundane), the cellphone in horror devolved into little more than a throwaway device: "Oh no, my battery is low! I can't get a signal!" Yawn.

Listen, I love that modern telephone mobility allows me to ignore phone calls even outside the comforts of my own home. But I think I can speak for horror movie fans and horror movie villains alike: filmmakers, dare to uncut that cord!



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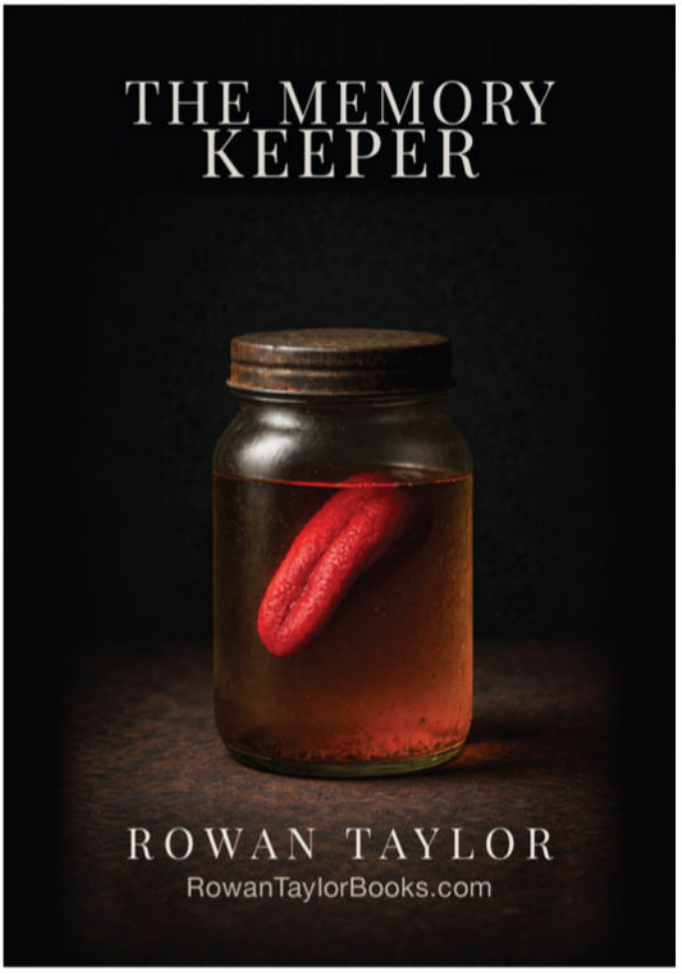
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AUDIO DROME

DEADLY | DANGEROUS | DECENT | DULL | DRIVEL | DOA DEAD ON ARRIVAL

REVIEWS BY JESSICA BUCK, ALEX DELLER, AARON VON LUPTON, AND JEFF SZPIRGLAS

BODY BAGS

SOUNDTRACK

John Carpenter and Jim Lang

Terror Vision

Body Bags begins a new phase of John Carpenter's career as a composer. Having parted ways with collaborator Alan Howarth, Carpenter works here alongside Jim Lang, whom he would go on to partner with on *In the Mouth of Madness*. This mid-career TV anthology, focused on a trio of stories, allows Carpenter and Lang to play around with a different set of musical tropes, such as bluesy jazz tracks that feel plucked from a '50s beatnik club or an extended instrumental rock jam. The strength of the soundtrack as a listening experience lies in these longer tracks – while *Halloween* was chock-full of iconic sounds, they were often short bursts of fright, whereas *Body Bags* feels looser and more organic. It's a world apart from the sonic dread Carpenter brought to projects such as *The Fog* or *Assault on Precinct 13*, but it opens another portal into the director/composer's world that he would later expand with his *Lost Themes* albums. ☠☠☠☠ **JS**

GRAHAM REYNOLDS

ELECTRONIC

The Portcullis

Fire Records

Austin-based composer Graham Reynolds is one of those serial overachievers: he's collaborated with jazz outfits, choreographers, and orchestras; soundtracked a suite of Richard Linklater projects (*A Scanner Darkly*, *Hit Man*, etc.); and provided live scores for silent classics such as *Nosferatu* and *The Lodger*. He hadn't released a solo album until last year's *Mountain*, but is clearly making up for lost time now. *The Portcullis*, as the title suggests, has something distinctly medieval about it. Dungeon-synth elements creep and lurk, while a sense of claustrophobic mystery seeps forth like water slowly leeching through old stone walls. Immersive and quietly transportive, the album is perfectly suited to late-night gaming sessions, long walks through overgrown forests, or the kind of genealogical forays Reynolds himself recently undertook, whereupon he learned that his ancestors included painters, galley cooks, and sheriffs. Released in conjunction with the folklore zine *Weird Walk*, the deluxe edition fittingly includes a "bespoke medieval dice ritual." ☠☠☠☠½ **AD**

CELESTIAL HEX

ELECTRONIC

Nightshades

Library of the Occult

Library of the Occult continues its onslaught of horror-cinema-centric releases with the debut album from German darkwave trio Celestial Hex. This time the emphasis is on late-'80s/early-'90s vampire flicks, as the band aims to please fans of *The Lost Boys*, *Near Dark*, and *Bram Stoker's Dracula* with late-night goth-club fuel. Jas and Denise's vampy lead vocals drip with sex and seduction, while analog synths paint fog-drenched city streets where danger lurks in every alleyway, and a Sisters of Mercy-esque rhythm section keeps things grounded in the cemetery. This is what a vampire street gang would sound like if they were in a band, spending their time dancing 'til dawn or hunting prey in black-and-white makeup and Got2b Glued hair product. The music makes for a decent warm-up while getting fashionable on Saturday night – and hopefully for an even hotter time with whomever you bring home to your coffin. ☠☠☠½ **AVL**

DARK RIDE

PUNK

Blade Manor

Fiend Force/Massacre Records

Drawing heavily from heavyweights like the Misfits, AFI, and Tiger Army, Dark Ride's latest effort, *Blade Manor*, evokes a sense of familiarity – so much so that you'll occasionally think you're listening to cover tunes before realizing it's just a reasonable facsimile. Steeped in Ataris-like nostalgia, the first single "Rewind" pays homage to days browsing the horror aisles of video-rental shops. That track, as well as "Coffin," gives Emilio Menze's voice room to soar, making them easy standouts. Punched-up drums and chainsaw-sharp guitar lines keep a galloping pace through all twelve songs, each with a distinct style. Sing-alongs and mentions of Halloween, midnight, death, and blood abound. At times the refrains of "this is our life at the end of October" and "I bury boyfriends, beheaded husbands" come across as half-baked and a bit too on-the-nose. Overall though, this is a tightly composed album that isn't ruined by its occasional dalliances with Hot Topic-brand lyricism. ☠☠☠ **JB**

THE DARTS

PUNK

Halloween Love Songs

Adrenalin Fix Music

Fuzzed-out female garage-punk band The Darts is well aware that Halloween isn't just about costumes – it's a way of life. As such, the thirteen-track concept album *Halloween Love Songs* offers substance beyond spooky-season gimmicks. Like something you'd hear in a too-cool thrift shop, The Darts combines the swamp/surf energy of The Cramps with an amped-up Wanda Jackson sensibility. As October 31 moves from day into night, so does this album: the first half is cartoonishly bright, with kitschy tracks such as "Zombies on the Metro" and "Vampires in Love," both anchored by feisty

THE BONEYARD

SOUNDTRACK

John Lee Whitener

Mystic Vault

Even with some unusually notable casting (including Phyllis Diller as Miss Poopinplatz), 1991's *The Boneyard* hasn't exactly lingered in our collective memory, but Mystic Vault has made a great find here: a score that works equally well as an isolated listen. It begins with an overture that feels more akin to a dark-tinged swashbuckler à la *Army of Darkness* (which it predates), laying out a gauntlet of energy the rest of the score is compelled to follow. Far from being a series of menacing chords and jump-scare stings (which are still here), Whitener's score also uses textures from pizzicato strings and various percussion, as well as melodic elements that make the low-budget horror film feel a lot bigger than it is – not unlike just about every one of Richard Band's Full Moon scores. To top it off, we even get Rick Riso's power ballad "Brave Heart" to close things out. ☠☠☠☠ **JS**

PODCASTS FROM BEYOND

HORROR DADS

THEME: Horror Art & Film
FORMAT: Discussion
FREQUENCY: Monthly

To some, becoming a parent means having less time, space, or energy for niche interests – especially the kind that involve frightening imagery not suitable for young eyes. However, the *Horror Dads* podcast believes a balance can be struck, emphasizing that yes, you can have kids and still love horror.

Hosted by brothers-in-law and real-life dads to two children each, Jamie Fabian and John Schular gather about once a month to chat about horror news, movies, art and, of course, fatherhood. While many podcast hosts drop a bit of personal info into the conversation here and there, the *Horror Dads* make a point to discuss family life in every episode, and it's clear that their love of the genre grows the more they share it with their impressionable offspring.

Using a simple format, Fabian and Schular come up with themes and then discuss ten horror films or TV shows that fit the bill: examples from past shows include creepy hospitals, shark movies, airborne scares, horror malls, and amusement parks. Not content with rehashing the same well-worn franchises, their lists unearth picks from off the beaten path. In fact, some of their episodes are even dedicated to hidden horror gems, or films worth a second try. Even the most seasoned horror fan will want to keep a notepad handy to jot down recommendations.

Setting themselves apart from traditional scary movie podcasts, the *Horror Dads* make space for visual artists and merchandise manufacturers working in the genre. Often asking each other what they've bought lately, they'll shout out cool independent creators and describe "who they're wearing" in terms of horror tees. Occasionally they'll invite guest artists such as Tim Jacobus (*Goosebumps*), Matty Ryan Tobin, Dan Kern, and Sara Deck to discuss their craft and weigh in on the scares that inspire them. Film industry pros like director Tony Cadwell (*Haunted Connecticut*), actress Lauren-Marie Taylor (*Friday the 13th Part 2*), and composer Alexander Taylor have also appeared on the show.

Having debuted in 2020 alongside many other creative COVID ventures, *Horror Dads* has withstood the test of time with over 140 episodes in the can, an active Patreon community, and its own (very fetching) merch line. Whether you're single and free to watch all the movies you want or only have time to listen to horror content between school pickups, *Horror Dads* is a great way to unearth some genre gems and increase your appreciation for artists who make the genre their bread and butter.

JESSICA BUCK

organ lines and '60s-rock danceability. By the sixth song, "Every Night is Halloween," the shadows begin to creep in – the upbeat pace unfolds into a smouldering groove, heating up the party as daylight fades. Simultaneously gritty and sultry, a slight haze carries the album through to its languid conclusion in "Late Drive." ☠☠☠☠ **JB**

ABSENT RITUAL

METAL

The Cryptic Descent: A Compilation of Madness

ETERNAL DEATH

Does a three-track demo really warrant a subtitle like "A Compilation of Madness?" Probably not, but what Absent Ritual's debut might lack in terms of runtime, it makes up for in ambition. At heart, the band plays mid-paced black metal: lurking, lunging stuff with baleful vocals and melodies that rake at your flesh like skeletal hands. While it does so admirably, it's in deploying prog and psychedelic elements that *The Cryptic Descent* truly blossoms like a repugnant corpse flower. Things stretch, expand, and wander off down hidden passageways, lending the proceedings a sour, murky, discombobulating atmosphere that prickles the nape while simultaneously gouging out chunks of red-raw flesh. It's in closing track "A Savage Rage" that the band's weirder proclivities really come to the fore: an eerie, trudging instrumental that recalls the velvet-draped horror metal of Death SS far more than the scything blasts of vintage Darkthrone. ☠☠☠☠ **AD**

KALLOHONKA

METAL

Lazer Blood

MEMORY TERMINAL

Kallohonka claims a ludicrous backstory akin to multiple *X-Files* episodes duct-taped together (CIA experiments! Cults! Hive minds!) while billing itself "slug metal." If your bullshit-o-meter still works then you're likely already headed for the door, but hold up! Because *Lazer Blood* is actually kinda fun. Rather than some kind of goofball Juggalo nonsense, Kallohonka barfs out a weird, unpredictable brand of rock that's equal parts sludge, prog, punk, and clown car music. Barring Amie Carson's caustic vocals, everything sounds melted and sticky at the edges, like a corpse that's been prematurely pulled from a bathtub full of acid. Meanwhile, tracks like "Experimenting with the Dead" and "Leeches" suggest brains that've been wrecked by overexposure to conspiracy-minded flicks such as *The Fury* and *Blue Sunshine*. All in all, *Lazer Blood* serves as a twofold warning: trust no one and, for heaven's sake, don't do as many drugs as this band has. ☠☠☠ **AD**

SIGN OF EVIL

METAL

Psychodelic Darkness

EDGED CIRCLE PRODUCTIONS

The Chilean manglers that make up Sign of Evil clearly figure they're onto a good thing, because this is now their fourth *Psychodelic* release since they formed the act in 2020. Lewd, crude, and unashamedly primitive, the band (comprised only of mastermind Witchfucker and his drummer pal Thoth) uses the feral muck of Venom as its starting point before twisting it into ungodly new shapes. Speed- and first-wave black metal are dosed with lysergic FX, unsettling off-key plinks, and ugly, language-of-the-devil vocal invocations while Witchfucker mutters into his cereal about witches, demons, and strange sulphuric odours. Comparisons can be drawn to the punkier likes of G.I.S.M., Devil Master, and Final Gasp but this is definitely a horns-up metal release first and foremost: an ugly and wretched display of base instincts that does its darnedest to make Midnight look like chaste and cherubic exemplars of wholesome sober living. ☠☠☠½ **AD**

NASH THE SLASH
A LIFE IN THE SHADOWS

SWATHED IN SURGICAL BANDAGES WHILE SAWING BLOOD-SPURTING VIOLINS ON STAGE TO A BUZZING WALL OF SOUND, NASH THE SLASH WAS A CULT HORROR ARTIST IN THE TRUEST SENSE, though one who remained relatively hidden throughout his career as an independent Canadian artist since the late '70s. A new documentary from Toronto filmmakers Tim Kowalski and Kevan Byrne titled *Nash the Slash Rises Again* aims to shine a light on this musical mad scientist and cultural subversive, from his theatrical prog rock beginnings to touring with Gary Numan in the UK, eventually uncovering an even darker side to the man's life along the way.

A classically trained multi-instrumentalist, Nash the Slash (born Jeff Plewman) named himself after a killer butler in the 1927 Laurel and Hardy silent film *Do Detectives Think?* While he was best known for playing the electric violin and mandolin, Nash also incorporated synthesizers and pioneered the use of cassette tape loops, becoming a trailblazer for electronic and industrial music. Over the course of nearly 40 years, Nash released several albums and EPs, performed live scores to silent films including *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and *Nosferatu*, and created an over-the-top stage show influenced by early shock rocker Arthur Brown. Though never achieving significant financial success, Nash's work found celebrity fans across the globe, including David Gilmour, Gary Numan, and Iggy Pop.

"I came to this [documentary] as a fan as far back as high school," says Kowalski, who co-wrote and directed. "I had a summer job at a printing plant, and this older guy there started telling me a story about playing on Nash's first record. He talked about this movie theatre where Nash lived above the box office, with a recording studio set up in his apartment. He even said Nash kind of looked like Elton John, just without the bandages. Part of me thought, that sounds like a movie I'd want to see. After Nash passed in 2014, I started digging into his story."

Over a decade and many crowdfunding campaigns and grant applications later, *Nash the Slash Rises Again* premiered at Toronto's Blood in the Snow Film Festival last year. The film opens with a shot of mid-'70s Toronto as a cultural wasteland, far from the bustling, diverse, world-class city it has become. With little going on, the downtown weirdos and misfits found refuge in Toronto's rep theatres, which screened movies like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Pink Flamingos* and eventually hosted live music, including early punk shows. It was here that Nash got his start, at the 99 Cent Roxy, performing with the prog rock band Breathless. A career steeped in outsider culture was born.

"Nash's music just oozes horror influences," says Kowalski, "in the subject matter, the blood-soaked live shows and, of course, his iconic [*Invisible Man* actor] Claude Rains–style image. His knowledge of horror films and literature was pretty staggering. And if you spend as much time as Nash did revelling in the darkness, it's going to find its way into what you create."

And while *Nash the Slash Rises Again* touches on high-profile fans such as Gary Numan, whom Nash opened for on a UK tour, and Martin "Youth" Glover from Killing Joke, who shared the same bill while in England, the story spirals downward much the way Nash's later life did. By the end, the doc uncovers a rather sobering end for the man, including his cutthroat working relationships, serious drug abuse, a secret gay life, assault charges, jail time, and a lonely death where his body was discovered four days after his passing.

"I think Nash is the very definition of an iconoclast," Kowalski summarizes. "He found his own way of doing things and never wavered, relentlessly chasing the goals he set for himself. Hopefully, this film will shine a light on his incredible legacy and help him become recognized as an icon in a broader, mainstream sense."

PLAY DEAD

NOW PLAYING > AN ABYSS OF DREAMS, NO-SKIN

AN ABYSS OF DREAMS

PC
Studio Chien d'Or

Sometimes horror games provide pure escapism into alternate universes; other times, they articulate the terror of the real that must never be buried. New from Montreal-based Studio Chien d'Or, *An Abyss of Dreams* scratches both those itches in a twisted tale pulled from the pages of Canadian history.

Though it isn't taught in enough history classes, Quebec's Grande Noirceur ("Great Darkness") refers to a nasty period under the reign of Premier Maurice Duplessis, whose legacy is marked by having put tens of thousands of orphans through unnecessary medical experimentation, torture, and abuse (look it up, if you dare). Studio Chien d'Or founder/director Olivier Leclair is a direct descendant of what are now referred to as "the Duplessis orphans" and crafted *An Abyss of Dreams* as an environmental puzzle game and a lesson in forgotten history. You play as Thérèse, the newest addition to Saint-Nicolas-de-la-Passion orphanage. By day, she navigates the terrors of the orphanage, including the ruthless Sister Marie-Jeanne, whose cruel disciplinary measures often result in tragedy. But by night, Thérèse (and, mysteriously, many of the girls at St Nick's) is transported to a cosmic dream realm. Do the secrets of these dreams offer salvation from her daytime fate?

Beautifully illustrated and meticulously detailed, *An Abyss of Dreams* is equally immersive in both its environs, from the drab, crucifix-festooned hallways of the orphanage to the alternate reality of the fantasy dream realm. The puzzles are tough but not insurmountably so; getting stuck is often a matter of stepping away from the game and coming back to it with a new perspective. While low on overt blood spray, the described violence perpetrated upon these children is nothing short of nightmare fuel and will carve these characters' names in your heart. An example of solid horror storytelling and a memoir of historical atrocity that we can't afford to forget, *An Abyss of Dreams* is a truly haunting journey.

ANDREA SUBISSATI

HEADSHOTS: GORGEOUS ENVIRONS, TASTEFUL STORYTELLING IN DEALING WITH REAL-LIFE ATROCITY
MISFIRES: NO HINT MECHANISM, DREAM REALM NAVIGATION IS SOMETIMES CONFUSING

NO-SKIN

PC, Nintendo Switch 2, PS5, Xbox Series X/S
NoEye-Soft/Feardemic

NO-SKIN, the latest lo-fi horror outing from a single developer known as NoEye-Soft, is a game that feels deceptively slight at a glance. From its minimalist gameplay to its 8-bit graphics, it's *Cookie Clicker*-simple, but there are indeed depths to be mined here, all of them weird.

One minute, you and your friends are partying in that early twentysomething dirtbag kinda way, bemoaning lousy jobs, flirting, and engaging in shit-talk. The next, you wander into the kitchen and encounter a man with no skin. He hands you a knife and a gun and demands that you venture out into the apartment building in order to find and return his missing epidermis. It's a confusing start to the game, and it only gets more confusing from there.

Each turn, you're presented with three possible environments to enter, such as a garage, a basement, or a hallway. Within each environment is a handful of possible encounters (fights with increasingly twisted versions of your friends, cultists, abominations, and more). Perhaps you'll simply find an item, a strange sort of merchant offering various buffs, or a health-replenishing interaction. The numerical chance of each possibility is given beforehand, allowing you to choose strategically. You progress in tiny increments towards your fated meeting with NO-SKIN himself, unlocking more mechanics along the way. However, the difficulty ramps up significantly as well, with enemy HP and debuffs increasing.

In true rogue-like fashion, runs can be short and failure frequent, but the compulsion to try *just one more time* quickly becomes automatic… especially when completed runs unlock more characters, more endings, more goodies for your next attempt, and more pieces of the puzzle. The lore won't completely unravel the cosmic eldritch horrors of the incoherent narrative, but the ambiguity is a large part of *NO-SKIN*'s appeal.

There's also the draw of those surprisingly grotesque pixel graphics depicting strange rituals, disembodied organs, bizarre creatures, and a huge variety of other fever dream nightmares. Toss in an appropriately eerie atonal score and the entire affair boasts a surprisingly atmospheric vibe. *NO-SKIN* thrives on the contrast between its straightforward gameplay and its nigh-indecipherable story, resulting in an unsettling and addictive game.

STACIE PONDER

HEADSHOTS: GREAT HORROR ATMOSPHERE, HIGH REPLAYABILITY, INTRIGUING LORE
MISFIRES: RNG-ESUS MAY NOT BLESS A RUN, GAMEPLAY CAN BE TOO SIMPLISTIC, OPAQUE STORY

Horror in Culture & Entertainment

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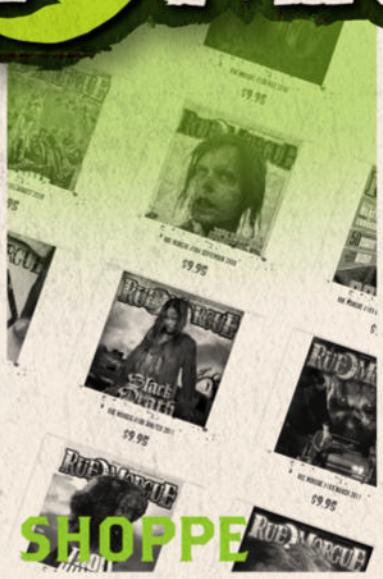


ZOMBIES HAVE LURCHED (SOMETIMES SPRINTED!) THROUGH HORROR FOR DECADES. AND WHILE GEORGE A. ROMERO'S GHOULS STILL DOMINATE, OTHER TAKES ARE JUST AS CHILLING. BUT WHICH VERSION STANDS ABOVE THE REST? TWO OF OUR WRITERS ENTER THE RING TO BATTLE IT OUT!

WHAT'S THE MOST UNIQUE PORTRAYAL OF ZOMBIES ON SCREEN?

SHOCK WAVES (1977)

ERNIE MAGNOTTA

"Why Wiederhorn's film and its novel take on zombies never got the recognition or success it deserves remains a mystery and a shame."

VS

DEATHDREAM

DR. BENNY GRAVES

"Deathdream's sympathetic revenant has a strong cinematic kinship with fright fare such as Pet Sematary *and* Bring Her Back.*"*

TRUE TO GEORGE A. ROMERO'S LEGACY OF HIGH CONCEPT AND A SHOESTRING BUDGET, 1977'S *SHOCK WAVES* IS A LEAN, CLAUSTROPHOBIC, AND CREEPY zombie film that doesn't lift anything else from Romero's universe.

Co-written and directed by Ken Wiederhorn (*Eyes of a Stranger*, *A House in the Hills*), *Shock Waves* deals with a small group of tourists (headed by Brooke Adams from Cronenberg's *The Dead Zone* and 1978's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*) who become shipwrecked on a not-so-deserted island. Once there, they come under attack from a horde of amphibian-like Nazi zombies who begin decimating the tourists and the ship's crew one by one.

Filmed in Miami and West Palm Beach, Florida, in July of 1975 for only $200k, these zombies are able to move pretty quickly, and they do not consume human flesh. The result of Nazi mad science circa World War II, these well-preserved Mengelian creatures were once super-soldiers, genetically altered to persist in any environment, including underwater, to achieve their goal: destroy their enemies.

Unlike the varied rotters we've seen in myriad movies and TV shows, the monsters of *Shock Waves* all look exactly the same: with blonde hair, scarred faces, and identical Nazi uniforms and goggles, they represent a horde that's as faceless as it is mindless. Their one weakness is their extreme sensitivity to sun: the only way to kill these zombies is to remove their goggles.

In addition, *Shock Waves* doesn't rely on extreme gore for its thrills. Instead, it is quite tense and suspenseful, with some truly creepy imagery, such as showing a half dozen soggy zombies in SS uniforms slowly emerging from the sea. The film also benefits from the presence of genre icons Peter Cushing (*The Curse of Frankenstein*, *The Brides of Dracula*) and John Carradine (*The Grapes of Wrath*, *House of Dracula*, *The Howling*).

Why Wiederhorn's film and its novel take on zombies never got the recognition or success it deserves remains a mystery and a shame. Whatever the reason, *Shock Waves* is a fun, scary, suspenseful, and quite original piece of '70s horror – with haunting images pulled from real-life atrocity – that leaves a lasting impression on its viewers.

I HAVE A DEEP AND EARTHY LOVE FOR THE CLASSIC UNDEAD THAT POPULATE THE CELLULOID OF THE ZOMBIE GENRE: BUB, TARMAN, BILL HINZMAN, ETC. AND let's not forget the guy trying to get his blood pressure taken in *Dawn of the Dead*! However, love is not fear, and there's one portrayal of the zombie that I find uniquely unsettling in particular. Between the one-two punch of *Black Christmas* and *Children Shouldn't Play with Dead Things*, horror-king Bob Clark gave us a unique take on the living dead with 1974's *Deathdream*.

Deathdream is a monkey's paw tale by way of proto-*Pet Sematary*, soaked in high-proof dread. The film tells the story of Andy Brooks, a young American soldier shot dead by a sniper rifle in Vietnam. When word of his death reaches Andy's family, his mother Christine refuses to acknowledge the news. You see, he promised dear ma that he would return, and Andy's a man who keeps his word. Appearing visibly unchanged at his parents' doorstep in the middle of the night, the Brooks family is initially overjoyed. However, this Andy is distant and eerily quiet, staring off into the distance and seldom speaking. It's at night that he animates, when he needs fresh human blood in order to continue to keep his promise.

A scathing indictment of the horrors that the Vietnam War wrought on America's sons, *Deathdream* is absolutely chilling. Andy behaves very much like the changed men who returned from America's war – a traumatized witness to senseless carnage that ultimately accomplished nothing. His nightly bloodlust speaks to the unholy horrors imprinted on soldiers who survived their time in combat, but even more gut-wrenching is the discovery that Christine will do anything to keep her son around, even after discovering his undead nature. This element brings us into the exquisitely bleak world of the power that grief can have over the psyche. In that way, *Deathdream*'s sympathetic revenant has a strong cinematic kinship with fright fare such as *Pet Sematary* and *Bring Her Back*.

There are plenty of shambling zombies that can shock and disgust through efficient gut-munching, but it took that Bob Clark magic to conjure one who leaves you feeling scooped out, body and soul.

LAST ISSUE'S WINNER

AS VOTED BY YOU ON FACEBOOK

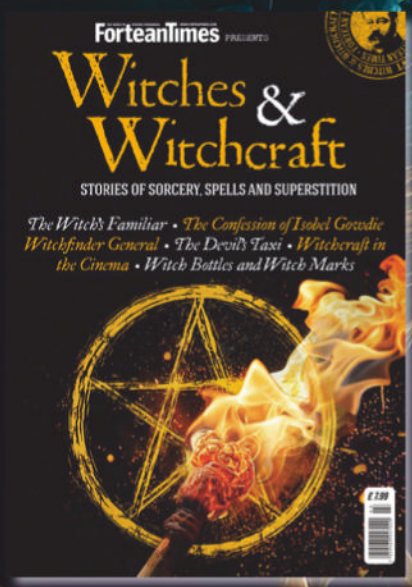
IS SOUND SCARIER THAN VISUALS WHEN IT COMES TO HORROR MOVIES?

NO! 13% 87% YES!

SOUND IS SCARIER THAN VISUALS WHEN IT COMES TO HORROR MOVIES!

THE WORLD OF STRANGE PHENOMENA

FortеanTimes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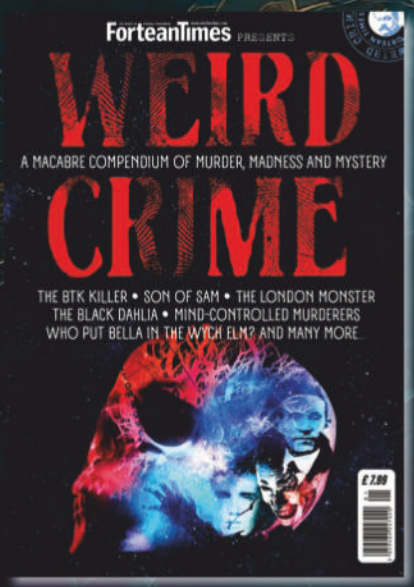
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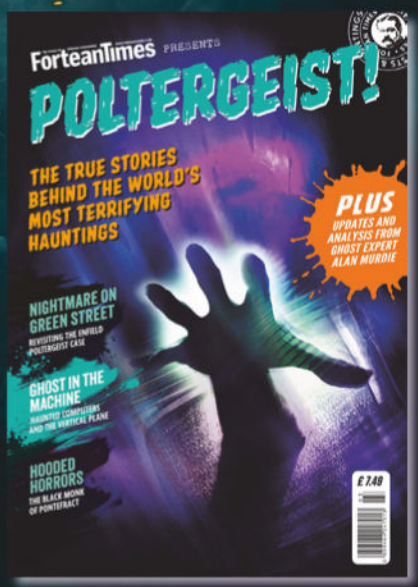

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